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THE GENTLEMAN FROM PIKE; or, THE GHOST OF THE CANYON. A TALE OF THE AMERICAN WONDER-LAND.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "PATENT-LEATHER JOE," "TIGER DICK," "ALWAYS ON HAND," "A HARD CROWD," ETC., ETC.



AND STILL THE MONSTER GAINED UPON HIM—NEARER!—EVER NEARER!—HOWLING IN ITS RAGE, LAUGHING IN ITS GLEE, YET EVER NEARER!

The Gentleman From Pike,

OR,

THE GHOST OF THE CANYON.

A Tale of the American Wonder-Land.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "TIGER DICK," "BOWIE, THE KNIGHT OF CHIVALRY," "ELEGANT EGBERT," "THE CREOLE COUSINS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GHOST OF THE CANYON.

"In God's name! what is it?"

"Boss, it gits me?"

"Not the cry of an animal. I know every one in the mountains."

"No more is it human. No ten men could make such a racket as that. Jest hear it go down the canyon?"

All listened while the weird echoes waned in the distance. Ever and anon some jutting crag would prolong that unearthly howl and fling back the fierce snarls that followed it like demon laughter.

They were a little handful of horsemen, less than half a score, all told.

He whose commanding presence and superior intelligence marked him as the leader of the party was a young man, certainly under twenty-five. His dress, though of coarse material, was well-made and fitted his well-knit figure perfectly. There was no dandyish affectation of linen, his shirt being of woolen stuff, with a black silk neckerchief at his throat. But scrupulous neatness marked the gentleman.

None who saw him could doubt his high courage and punctilious honor; but on his knitted brows, out of keeping with his youth, sat a shade of settled melancholy—an intangible something which told of a soul that had withstood the lightning shock of a great despair.

Such was William Carleton, the man who was known far and wide in the mountain country as "The Gentleman from Pike."

He was mounted on a superb black charger whose blood-red nostrils and rolling eyes denoted his fiery spirit, while the quietness with which he stood showed his perfect training.

The men bearing the Gentleman from Pike company were ordinary mountain men, barring one exception in the person of the old scout, Judd Baker. He was a rough diamond—a man whom you could "tie to, every time!"

"It is the strangest sound I ever heard!" exclaimed the Gentleman from Pike, referring to the weird cry that had caused the whole party to draw rein and listen in wonder.

"Cap'n," said Judd Baker, solemnly—"never heard that noise afore?"

"No. Have you? What is it?"

And the Gentleman from Pike turned curiously to the old scout.

The other members of the party also looked to him for explanation.

He shook his head gravely, and replied:

"Yes, to the fust question. I dunno, to the second."

"Why, Judd, what is the matter with you?" asked the leader.

He had never before seen such a look on the scout's face.

"Waal, cap'n," was the deliberate reply, "I'm stumped! Sense is sense; but natur' gits away with all our calculations sometimes! Look a-hyar, cap'n!—do you b'lieve in sperrits?"

"Spirits, Judd?"

"Yes,—sperrits!—unairthly criturs that comes up from down below, to play the devil on this hyar airth!—ghosts!—spooks!"

"Nonsense! There are no such things as ghosts!"

"That's what you say!" replied the scout, doggedly. "I used to b'lieve that way myself."

"But you don't mean to say that this strange sound is the voice of a spirit?"

"Ef it ain't, then what is it?"

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"No more does any other livin' man!"

"But it doesn't follow that it is supernatural because no one knows its source. Since you have made such a point of it, suppose we find out? Come, men! I reckon you're not afraid to follow me?"

But the men, having caught the superstitious foreboding of the scout, manifested no responsive enthusiasm, but looked rather solemn, seeing which the Gentleman from Pike pursued:

"You, at least, Judd, will not fear to accompany me, even if the others hang back?"

"That's all right as fur as it goes, cap'n," replied the scout. "I don't take water for nothin' in human shape, ye understand, nor nothin' o' the animal kind that can't stand up ag'in' an ounce o' lead. But things as 'll filter bullets like water through a sieve—things that ye kin look through their innards like squintin' through glass—things that ye kin belt aside the topknot an' rap nothin' but wind!—them things gits me! Howsomdever, if you say go, I say foller! I never shook a squar' man yit, an' I allow I'd back you, cap'n, through fire 'n brimstun! But

ef so be you wouldn't mind a word afore we resk it—"

The old scout left the sentence incomplete, and looked appealingly at the commander.

"Drive ahead, Judd," said the other. "I know that you don't talk unless you have something to say."

"Waal, it's jest this: I knowed a mighty likely pilgrim, jest from the States. Plucky? That warn't no name for it! An' knowledgeable? Waal, sir, he could chin it with any preacher you ever see! I reckon, if he'd sot his mind to it, he could 'a' wrote a book that two men couldn't pack! He heard this thing last summer, when it fust come out. The boys told him that this canyon was ha'nted, an' that it would stand him in hand to let the Ghost o' the Canyon alone. He poo-pooed 'em for a pack of old women, an' swore that he'd never come back until he fetched the spook home in his breeches pocket. Cap'n," concluded old Judd, impressively, "he ain't got back yit!"

However William Carleton was impressed by the old scout's story, the men under him drank in every word open-mouthed.

As if to heighten the effect, at this instant the rocks rung again with that unearthly howl.

The long-drawn, dismal wail, scarcely audible at the beginning, swelled until it rivaled the loudest trumpet blast, then died away as it began. The savage snarls that followed it were indescribable.

The mountain men started and gazed about them with superstitious fear, as if they dreaded a malignant demon in every echoing crag. Plainly they needed but a signal to take to their heels in unmanly flight.

The Gentleman from Pike, though puzzled, was perfectly cool.

Judd Baker sat his horse like a man who had the courage to brave a danger which he fully appreciated.

"That was nearer than the last," said the leader. "Whatever it is, it is approaching us. We have but to wait, and the mystery will solve itself."

This announcement did not reassure the men, by any means.

"I reckon this hyar's a temptin' o' the devil!" growled one of them, gloomily. "Thar won't no good come of it, nobow!"

"If any man is afraid to stay, the road down the canyon is open," said the Gentleman from Pike, coolly. "I shall remain and see this thing through."

But while the voice had come from up the canyon, the echoes had answered from below, until either direction was filled with equal terrors; and the men clung to the older spirit of their leader as children look to their elders for protection.

"Cap'n," said Judd Baker, "do you hear that other noise?"

"The thunder? Yes. There is a storm somewhere among the mountains. But that need cause us no uneasiness. It is too far off."

"Perhaps! But you bet the Ghost o' the Canyon don't hang round for nothin'! It's bound to bring ill luck, mark my word! An', see! our hosses—that in some things is more knowledgeable than folks!—is tellin' us as plain as hoes-talk kin make it, that thar's somethin' in the wind."

Again that mysterious cry burst on the air.

The crags caught up the weird sounds and repeated them until it seemed as if they came from every direction and filled earth and heaven! Then like a sullen menace, came the rumble of thunder!

At first it was intermittent. Then it became a steady roar that made the air quiver until the very rocks seemed to partake of the shuddering motion.

Now the ever cool Carleton began to show signs of disturbance.

"That isn't thunder," he exclaimed. "What in the world is it?"

Judd Baker shook his head.

"Ef we was on the plains, I'd say it was a buffaler stampede," he replied. "But hyar I reckon it's some o' the devilment o' the ghost. Thar's no bettin' on what ye hear in a ha'nted canyon! Them things don't stand to reason, nobow. I allow he could fill this hyar place with singin', or fiddle-playin', jest as easy as not."

"Good God! Thar she comes!"

One glance, and with yells of terror the rest of the party "broke and ran," leaving the Gentleman from Pike and Judd Baker to face the unknown peril.

In truth, the object which burst into view at the head of the canyon was well calculated to inspire the beholder with dread.

Man, beast, or demon, it stood erect, apparently between six and seven feet in stature, and had in the main the semblance of humanity. But its body and limbs were covered with coarse, shaggy hair, like that of a grizzly bear, while from its head streamed locks of snowy whiteness far below its waist, a beard of corresponding length, and also white, falling upon its breast.

Thus far this mysterious being might have been taken for some Old Man of the Mountain.

But the most terrible features of this strange apparition yet remain to be described.

From the midst of its beard gleamed long, white teeth, interlocked like the fangs of a beast of prey, the upper canine teeth being elongated so as to extend below the chin, like the tusks of a walrus. But, more terrible still, from every part of its body seemed to spring writhing serpents. Its fingers and toes terminated in these loathsome reptiles. About its head their interlaced bodies formed a hideous coronet, from which darted a score of heads with quivering, forked tongues and beadlike eyes; while about its body and limbs they dangled at length or hung in living festoons.

Add to all this that blood-curdling cry, louder than that of any animal in the mountains, and you may form some faint conception of this thing from which the miners fled in dismay.

At sight of it even the cool Gentleman from Pike could not wholly repress a shudder of loathing. But curiosity chained him to the spot, and he remained gazing at it.

With difficulty he restrained his horse, the animal snorting and trembling with terror, only its perfect training rendering it obedient to his firm hand on the bridle-rein and the pressure of his knees.

As for Judd Baker, at sight of the monster he raised his rifle and fired.

"By the eternal! I've bored it!" he cried, as the creature sunk to the ground.

But instantly it arose, snatched the bullet from its breast, flung it away, and came on, making the canyon ring again with cries more terrible than ever.

Judd Baker's horse reared, pawed the air, whirled short round, and darted away, bearing its master willy-nilly down the canyon.

"Come on, cap'n, for God's sake!" cried the faithful old scout, as he strove in vain to master his frantic horse.

Whether or not William Carleton would have fled before this mysterious monster, just then his eyes passed on beyond and caught sight of a peril about which there could be no doubt.

It came with a rush of mighty winds that whirled the sand of the canyon bottom in eddying clouds, and a roar that drowned even the wild cry of the Ghost of the Canyon.

Without another instant's delay the man who had braved an unknown danger now whirled and dashed after his companions.

"Take to the ledges!" he shouted, as he overtook and passed them on his faster horse. "Judd, there is one! Sacrifice your horse, and save yourself!"

Then on like the wind he swept down that rocky way, until turning a sharp angle he burst upon a scene that brought his heart into his mouth, and caused him to utter a sharp cry of dismay.

CHAPTER II.

THE SPECTER OF THE TEMPEST.

The central figure is a man of commanding stature, with strongly-marked features and a long, flowing beard that gives him a sort of patriarchal dignity.

His dress is rude and coarse and soiled and worn; yet it seems to partake of the rugged character of the man.

In the hollow of his arm he carries a long rifle; bullet-pouch and powder-horn are slung from his shoulders; and in his broad leathern belt is thrust a heavy hunting-knife.

He walks with the stride of a conqueror; there is a grand, uplifted look on his expressive brow; his eyes kindle and his bronzed face is aglow with that high enthusiasm which must have marked the sturdy old Crusaders.

At his side walks a younger man, perhaps three or four-and-twenty, rather slight in build, with delicate, regular features and small hands and feet.

His dress, though now soiled with the dust of travel, is of fine material and fashionable cut. From his shirt bosom of spotless linen blazes a magnificent diamond. His arms are of costly mounting and exquisite workmanship.

In manner he has the ease of a polished man of the world, with that blase air which comes of "fast" city life.

But Jules St. Auburn is redeemed from effeminacy by an eye which, winsome and rather languid when it rests upon a woman, assumes when looking at a man a clear, steady light that never fails to command respect. No bully in his sober senses ever tried to "crowd him."

Behind these men follows a train of white-tiled emigrant wagons, drawn by patient-eyed oxen, and occupied by the women and children and household gods of these sturdy pioneers in the new El Dorado; while last are driven the cattle with which they are to stock their wilderness home.

On either side rise rocks, cliff on cliff, shutting in the vista in front and in the rear by the windings of the gorge, seeming ever to close the little band in a deep well whose jagged outlines at the top loom grim against the clear blue sky.

Under foot, the way is obstructed by huge boulders which, by frosts and the slow wearing of the waters, have become detached from the towering crags, to fall into the canyon bottom and be ground against each other by the rushing spring torrents, until their jagged angles are worn smooth and round.

Bits of bleached wood and weeds, lodged in the sand about their bases, also show the action of water.

"Capt. Gunnison," said St. Auburn, coming out of a reverie, "who is this Mrs. Amberleigh who joined us at Atchison? There is something about her so sad that, man as I am, I can scarcely restrain the tears of sympathy that spring to my eyes, when I look at her face with its patient suffering and piteous appeal. It seems as if she were ever on the point of weeping, yet never weeps. And she so young—certainly not more than five-and-twenty."

Was this mockery or genuine feeling?—for about this man there was a subtle something which eluded description. It was as if behind the loftiest and most humane sentiments ever lurked covert sneer.

A man of the world would have detected this at once, and kept an eye on Jules St. Auburn; but Capt. Gunnison's simplicity saw nothing of it.

"Such sensibilities do credit to your heart, my boy—they do credit to your heart!" said he, laying his hand affectionately on the shoulder of the younger man, and casting one brief glance of what seemed like gratitude into his face.

Then, meeting the questioning gaze of the other, he withdrew his hand and his glance together, almost precipitately; and one might have fancied a faint flush on his deeply bronzed cheek.

"I know nothing of her past life," he pursued, dreamily, "nor of her future purposes. She has not taken me into her confidence further than to say that she wished to go to the mountain country with people in whose company she would feel safe."

"And her child—" began St. Auburn. But Captain Gunnison took the words out of his mouth.

"Ah! there my heart misgives me!" he sighed, with a foreboding shake of the head. "I fear the wilderness will prove a rude place in which to transplant so delicate a flower!"

"Boo—oo—OON!" spoke the hollow heavens, in a sullen menace that made the very rocks tremble, as if in corroboration of the leader's boding prognostic.

"Hark! Was not that thunder?" asked St. Auburn, with a show of concern. "I have read ugly stories of the sudden rising of these mountain streams."

"If it is a storm," answered the leader, "it is far distant among the mountain-tops. There will be time for no dangerous rising of the waters in this pass—if my information is not defective; and I have taken every precaution to acquaint myself from reliable sources—before we emerge from this narrow defile upon as fair a plateau as the eye need wish to rest upon. Two hours, at most—with God's blessing!—will suffice to take us to that haven of security; and there we will pitch our camp for the night."

But again the canyon reverberated with a dull, wrathful roar. The birds wheeled round and round, uttering shrill screams. Across the strip of clear sky swept a cloud of dust and eddying leaves; and a chill gust came down the canyon, laden with fine, cutting sand.

"Our stock are getting restless," said St. Auburn, diverted from the subject under discussion, and glancing back to where the cattle were crowding each other and bellowing mournfully at intervals, while their drivers were striving to keep them in order, with much hallooing and, it must be confessed, some profanity as well.

The women, too, were visible, thrusting their heads from the canvas tilts and casting anxious glances at the strip of sky overhead, which, however, was yet calmly reassuringly blue.

These women were, for the most part, plainly of plebeian stock—the mothers and sisters, wives and daughters of honest, yet rude and illiterate men.

As for the children, they were a lot of shock-headed little semi-savages, as happy as kings, as active as bees, and as mischievous as monkeys!

But there were two rare exceptions to this low grade of humanity, standing out with all the delicacy and purity of calla lilies amid a rank growth of sunflowers and hollyhocks, in the persons of Mrs. Amberleigh and her daughter Lillian.

Seated in the first wagon of the train, amid such comforts as Captain Gunnison's care could secure for her without awakening the jealousy of the less favored, Mrs. Amberleigh pressed her sweet child close to her side, stroked her sunny hair, kissed her pure, white brow, and gazed into her bright eyes with a love unspeakable.

And peering up into her mother's face, the child smiled sweetly, encouragingly, until the world-worn woman was fain to smile back again, yet with a sad pathos that would have moved the beholder to tears.

"Ah! my precious darling," murmured the mother, "amid all my sorrow, God has spared you to my hungering love! What should I do without my baby?"

"Mamma," said the child, in a voice of liquid music, climbing into her mother's lap and steal-

ing her arms about her neck—"my own pretty mamma! why are you always so sad? Why don't you ever laugh, mamma dear, like Auntie Kimball?" (The child referred to the prettiest, merriest and most intelligent of the emigrants' wives.) "She is always happy—"

"Hush! hush, my child!" murmured the mother, while a shadow of pain flitted across her face, and her lips quivered.

"Mamma," breathed the child, presently, in a hushed whisper, while her blue eyes grew wide with an undefined sense of mysterious solemnity—"Mrs. Davison asked me yesterday—are we going to find papa?"

But with a muffled cry of anguish, the mother gathered her startled child to her bosom in a spasmodic embrace, and turned her white, pain-drawn face and humid, supplicating eyes toward heaven, as if crying for mercy there.

Then she bowed her head into the little one's neck, and so rocked slowly back and forth, while low, stifled sobs were wrung from the depths of her bursting heart.

The child clung to her stricken parent, mute and trembling, awed by this whelming tide of emotion.

Sitting thus, they heeded not the gathering tempest, until a cry of dismay and an abrupt stopping of the wagon roused the mother from her absorption in her mysterious grief to a sense of her surroundings and the swift on-coming of impending danger.

The sight to which she awakened might well bring her heart into her throat, and cause her to hug her child more closely to her bosom; for down the canyon swept a horse and rider, like some spirit of the storm borne on the wings of the wind.

They seemed in the van of a dense shadow, which filled the mountain gorge behind them, making every wild lineament stand out clear and bold against the dark background, and followed swiftly at their heels, like some dread spectre hovering above them on dusky, slow-flapping wings, and seeking to envelop them in its baleful shade—while all about them whirled clouds of eddying dust!

On came the horse, like a thunderbolt—his hide, as black as night, dappled with flakes of snowy foam!—his gaping nostrils red as blood! his eyes flashing fire!

Such bounds!—such giant leaps!—down the rugged pathway, strewn on every hand with a thousand pitfalls, shot the sure-footed beast, with the directness and speed of a meteor!

Giving free rein to his trusted steed, the man rode with set teeth, stern, pale face, and steadily burning eye.

No quailing there! He had faced death too often and in too many forms to yield to its terror now! He rode like a god!

But now he catches sight of that doomed band of pilgrims to the new El Dorado, who have stopped short in wondering dismay; and rising in his stirrups, he swings his hand above his head, and shouts in stentorian tones:—

"Back! Back! On your lives, back! Back! For God's sake, back!"

And gazing at this bold rider in a sort of stupefaction which makes him forget even the great peril heralded, Jules St. Auburn turns ghastly pale, and exclaims:—

"My God! He!"

CHAPTER III

THE HORRORS OF DEATH CANYON.

AMID all the terrors of impending doom Jules St. Auburn stood like one suddenly turned to stone.

Around him were men and women with blanched lips and staring eyes, their hearts quailing with the chill dread of a vaguely comprehended peril. Down upon him came rushing the harbinger of death. He, deaf to the warning gazed at the warner—was it with horror, or fear, or hatred, or wonder?

This man of ice, who prided himself on never yielding to those perturbations of soul which shake weaker natures, now stood as if rooted to the spot, while his sallow cheeks grew paler and paler, his great brown eyes lost their habitual bored expression to gleam wide and wild, and all the graceful lines of his supple figure hardened into tense rigidity.

And this strange emotion found its counterpart in the man who was its occasion.

When he appeared at the head of the canyon, in that uncertain race with death, the rider of the black steed was perfectly cool and collected—not careless, but with every faculty wrought to the highest tension and held well in hand.

At sight of the doomed wagon-train he rose in his stirrups, a sudden gleam of excitement leaping into his eyes, and his set face taking on lines of anxious solicitude.

At first comprehending all in his earnest gaze, as he drew near he could not help distinguishing from the throng the man who stood so boldly in his path.

Then, as their eyes met, a terrible change swept over the face of the stranger. The pallor of anxious dread gave place to the livid hue of deadly passion. The pitying light of his eyes was burned up in the lurid flames of an unutterable hate. His lips were drawn back from his gleaming,

set teeth, and his nostrils dilated and turned white with fury.

From an angel, of beneficence flying to the rescue of imperiled humanity, he seemed suddenly transformed into a demon of wrath marshaling the hordes of destruction and with them sweeping down upon a hated race.

All this transpired in the twinkling of an eye. The next instant he had a shot past, a mother's despairing cry had caught his ear, and God had given into his keeping that which was destined to regenerate his nature and make amends for all the bitter past, though then he knew it not.

Behind him he left dire confusion and the madness of fear that dethrones reason, leaving only the blind instinct of selfishness. But, amid the horrors of that awful panic Jules St. Auburn was a man of ice. That swift-coming death which crazed others was unheeded by him, as he stood motionless, gazing after the rapidly-receding figure of the man who had so strangely moved him.

"So we meet again!" he muttered, with white lips.

Then a blood-curdling shudder ran through his frame, and as if to shut out not the present appalling scene, but an even more terrible memory, he covered his eyes with his hand.

But let us see what it was that came to the Gentleman from Pike in this moment when the lurid fires of consuming hate brought foremost all that was bitterest and most evil in his nature.

One startled glance showed Mrs. Amberleigh that the shadow following close at the heels of the flying rider was caused by a dense, black cloud (fringed with the border of white mist, rolling upward, eddying round and round, and torn into jagged tongues by conflicting currents of air) which was scudding across the strip of sky, a black, ermine-bordered pall, and marking its passage by an ebony shadow which swept along the earth like a trailing mantle.

She heard the god-like rider cry:

"Back! for the love of heaven! A mountain reservoir has burst, and is sweeping down the canyon, bringing death and destruction! For God's sake, good people, fly! Stay for nothing! Fly for your very lives!"

Then this feeble woman—this mother, in whose soul there were one unspeakable sorrow and one unspeakable love, rose to her feet, clasping in her protecting mother-arms, close over her swelling breast, her mildly-throbbing heart, the one priceless boon of that heaven which had frowned upon her in all else; and into her white face came something of that terrible defiance of fate seen in the blazing eyes and anguish-wrung brow of ill-starred Rizpah—that other mother of old, whose agony was equaled only by her undying love.

So she stood—mute, motionless, while shrieks of terror rose on every hand, and direful confusion turned that scene, but now of peace, into a very pandemonium of mad panic!—stood, with but one thought in her heart, one image in her eye!—stood, until that mad rider and his panting steed swept up to her, and would have passed by!

Then, with one gaze, as if she sought to photograph upon her soul the image of her sweet child in lines so deep, so enduring, that all the eternities could not efface them!—with one kiss, in which throbbed and glowed all the fervor of a mother's life long, deathless love, and the anguish of a heart that gave its last warm, constant pulses, then burst at parting!—she extended her heart's treasure to him; and in a voice that, vibrant with intense passion, rose clear and distinct from that wild hubbub as a strain of music cleaves its way through a Babel of discordant sounds, and arrested his attention as nothing else could, she cried:

"Save my child!—oh! save my baby!"

She saw him look her way!—she saw his stout arm thrust out as he swept by!—she felt her child plucked from her grasp!—she heard the little one's cry of dismay:

"Mamma! Mamma!"

Then, as the one object of her love was snatched from her gaze on the wings of the wind, the light of heaven faded out—the world seemed to slip from beneath her feet—and, with a shriek that told the death of hope and happiness, she fell like one dead!

Well, let her lie!—the sore heart is now at peace!—her shuddering vision is not appalled by the swooping hell of horrors that seemed to engulf the world!

When Captain Gunnison saw the herald of death come flying down the gorge, he stood for an instant like one in a dream, his thoughts had been so far away from any premonition of danger. Only for an instant, however, then he roused himself to the duties of his responsible position, and bounded to the rear of the wagon containing Mrs. Amberleigh, where his horse was tied by a leading line.

A spring, and he was in the saddle, and with heel and rein forced his frightened horse to the head of his command.

"Abandon the wagons!" he shouted, at the top of his stentorian lungs. "Take your wives and children on horseback and fly down the

canyon. If you can get upon ledges, do so; but risk none less than twenty feet high. Steady, men! Now is the time to show your coolness. Madden, for God's sake! do not attempt to turn that wagon! Don't you see that we will be in hopeless confusion? Stop, men! If you dare to disobey me, I will shoot you where you stand!—Wait, Mrs. Fay! Stay in the wagon until your husband comes for you. You cannot escape unaided.—Ho! herders! drive the stock down the canyon—down the canyon! Do not let them come this way!—they will trample your children to death! Great God! we're lost!"

Oh! it was a sight to appall the stoutest heart! No one man could stem the tide of that terrible panic.

In many cases, no doubt, the frightened oxen became unmanageable; but their drivers, too, lost presence of mind; and the leader, whose commands had heretofore always received prompt obedience, now saw men cramp their wagons round so short in the narrow pass as to overturn them, while frantic women, gathering their children in their arms, leaped from the wagons and ran hither and thither in aimless bewilderment, then came the mad rush of terrified cattle, jostling and leaping upon each other, and trampling everything under foot in their blind stampede!

Shrieks, prayers, oaths, and the bellowing of brutes, blended, in an awful Babel, until the black heavens were rent by a blinding flash of lightning, and the detonating thunder-crash rocked the everlasting hills and swallowed up all pigmy sounds in its universal roar!

Captain Gunnison saw that all authority was at an end—his voice could no longer be heard, nor would his counsels be heeded.

His duty to those who had intrusted themselves to his care now being fully discharged, he had a right to look to himself and—his! Yes, his!—for where was there a rival claimant?

He had seen little Lillian Amberleigh caught from the arms of her mother; and for the child he rejoiced; for with that bold rider she stood a better chance for life than any who were left in that death canyon.

But with the shriek of the mother ringing in his ears, and the sight of her falling as if stricken to the earth by a lightning shock, his heart had given a great bound, and then stood still, with a sinking agony that almost unmanned him.

Now he wheeled his horse, and in a moment had gathered the limp form in his stout arms; then away!—forcing a path through the horde of rushing cattle, and thundering down the canyon on the trail of that peerless rider who had pointed the way!

Then down fell the pall of impenetrable gloom, as if the demons of destruction must first hide their battle-ground from the light of day!

Next came the furies of the hurricane, rushing down the canyon like loose hordes of ravenous wolves—howling among the crags and caverns—shrieking among the pines, that writhed beneath the lash of the tempest like living things in torture—swooping down upon the now disordered train of wagons, some overturned, some inextricably interlocked, a mass of dire confusion, with madly raging brute creatures and equally frantic humanity—plucking the white tilts from their fastenings, and sending them whirling away into the darkness like frightened ghosts!

Next swirling sheets of rain, and pelting hail!

Last, a nameless horror.

Out from the blackness of the upper canyon it comes!—a demon! impersonal, unreasoning, irresistible!—a monster, with tossing mane of snow-white foam and spray! a mighty roar that makes the granite cliffs quiver! an insatiable maw in which all things perish!—charging down that way of death, until it overwhelms and engulfs the doomed band, and the feeble cries of God's creatures are swallowed up and hushed forever!

Then on it rushes, bearing on its black and foam-dappled bosom the wreck of animate and inanimate things, dashing them in its fiendish sport against opposing bowlders and jutting crags!

And, throned on a pinnacle of rock, canopied by the black mantle of night and with the lightnings his torch-bearers—crowned with his coronet of hissing reptiles, robed in his ermine of snow-white hair and beard, and sceptered with a wriggling serpent, stood the Ghost of the Canyon, filling the intervals of the bellowing thunder, rushing waters and roaring winds with his weird cries—a veritable King of Chaos reveling in the destruction of a world!

CHAPTER IV.

THE LIFE AND DEATH STRUGGLE.

A MOMENT ago the Gentleman from Pike had stood alone in the world, a stern, hard man, bound to the rest of mankind only by a tie of hate. But at the moment when that hate was wrought to the highest pitch of bitterness, he found within the circle of his arms a creature whose helplessness, whose innocence, whose infantile beauty appealed to him in an entirely

different way, stirring new springs in his being. So was he destined to be led back to kindred humanity by the hand of a little child!

But first came life!—escape from the jaws of that swift following vampire! and glancing back over his shoulder, he saw that he would be certainly overtaken before the wildest efforts of his gallant steed could bear him out of that death-trap!

"My own worthless life I might yield up," he reflected, bitterly; "but not hers! not the dawning existence of this little angel!"

So he rode on, gazing despairingly at the unmoved cliffs on either hand, racking his brain for an expedient, where it seemed as if there were none.

And still the monster gained upon him—nearer!—ever nearer!—howling in its rage, laughing in its glee, yet ever nearer!—oh! so fatally nearer!

"But there *must* be an escape!—there *shall* be an escape!" he cried aloud, in his new-found incentive to live.

And still his eyes shot burning glances through the gloom and driving rain and pelting hail; and still the roar of that pursuing demon goaded him on nearly to distraction.

Then, when he was almost in the clutches of death, his eye discovered a doubtful way to safety.

Only one endowed with almost superhuman strength might accomplish the fateful task; but that little bundle of helpless innocence, appealing to his heart, prompted him to superhuman effort.

"I can do it!" he cried—"to save her! But, oh! my noble horse, I must abandon—nay, sacrifice you!—you who have been ever faithful!—you whose sure-footed speed has snatched me from death a score of times! But, Invincible, I would give my life for hers! You, then, will not grudge yours? I know you will not!"

His hand fell upon the rein, drew the horse to the canyon wall, and there halted him.

In spite of that swift-coming terror, which would have made another animal unmanageable, the trained steed stood still, though he trembled in every limb.

With lightning agility the man sprang erect, so that he stood in the saddle; tossed the child upon a narrow ledge above his head; and, springing from his horse's back, caught the edge of the slippery shelf with his fingers; then shouted:

"Go, Invincible! go! Good-by, my noble fellow! I shall never see your like again!"

Obedient to his master's word, the noble steed sprang away down the canyon, and was soon lost in the gloom, while the sound of his flying hoofs was swallowed up in the roar of the on-coming flood.

Exerting a remarkable strength, and displaying great suppleness, the man drew himself up on the ledge.

But he was not yet beyond the reach of the water.

Rapidly unwinding a coil of slender rope from his waist, he tied one end about the body of the child, the other being secured to his own person.

Into a crevice in the rock above his head he thrust the strong blade of his bowie-knife; and after almost superhuman effort gained a footing on it; then, from this vantage-ground managed to get the tips of his fingers over the edge of another ledge.

Now ensued a terrible struggle—an exhausted man drawing himself up the slippery face of the rock, with the rush of the mighty flood already upon him, so that he dared not look round, and below him the helpless babe for whom he was putting forth these giant exertions!

A movement of the child in her fright, and she might slip from the ledge where she lay; or, if washed away by the flood, she must inevitably drag him from his hold by the rope that bound them together!

But he had calculated that chance.

He would save her or perish himself!

But at last, fortified by the indomitable pluck with which his little charge had inspired him, his iron muscles won; and the hero lay panting and exhausted on the ledge.

Not an instant too soon; for there came a shrill cry from below, and a wrench on the rope which nearly dragged him from his shelf; and he knew that the monster had tossed its formless hands upward and snatched his prize from her narrow resting-place.

In his despair the man cried aloud:

"Great God! I beseech thee!"

Following the way led by this intrepid rider, Captain Gunnison did not hope to gain the entrance to the canyon; he remembered a sloping ledge which they had passed, and hung his life—and hers!—upon the chance of reaching it before they were overtaken by the all-engulfing flood.

All sounds, save the earth-rocking crash of the thunder, were now lost in the continuous roar of the rushing waters, with which the smooth walls of the canyon reverberated with that peculiar effect noticed by one standing beside a ponderous bell in a steeple.

The rider could scarcely hear the regular

clash of his horse's iron-bound hoofs on the ringing rocks.

Already he felt the chill breath of the destroyer on his cheek, when that pathway leading up to possible safety loomed into view.

"One more effort," he shouted, "and we can defy the hungry billows!"

But the swash of the water was at his very heels!—the wind-driven spray swept over and around him!—an inarticulate prayer quivered on his lips!—he thought himself already engulfed!—when he swerved his horse to one side, and felt the noble beast mounting that narrow ascent in great bounds, every one of which bore him further out of the clutches of the swirling maelstrom!

Yes!—unscathed!—with her still clasped over his breast!—he had reached the blessed goal!

He was dizzy with the lifting of the crushing weight of that terrible suspense; and his swelling heart—not his dry lips—sent up a prayer of thanksgiving to the merciful Preserver!

But, half-way up, the ledge became too narrow for the blindly-rushing steed.

Captain Gunnison felt his leg crushed against the wall of the canyon; then the horse, rebounding from the rock, swerved outward, and lost his footing!

An expert horseman, the captain leaped off toward the inside; and while the animal went toppling down into the canyon-bed from which he had just escaped, the man alighted upon his feet, but was overborne by the weight he carried in his arms, and fell upon his face on the slippery rock.

To scramble again to his feet, and limp up the precarious pathway until it became so narrow, that even he could proceed no further, was the work of an instant.

Then he turned, just in time to see the grandest, yet most appalling spectacle he had ever witnessed—a wall of lissing foam, filling the narrow defile from side to side, rushing onward with a speed that would overmatch the fleetest horse, and swallowing up everything that lay in its path!

Seen in the alternate gloom and lurid lightning-glare, amid the howling winds and crashing thunder, and pelting rain and hail, it was a spectacle to quail a heart of steel!

It passed!

Then came that which sickened the heart of the man with horror!—the wreck of what an hour ago had had unity and purpose, life and bounding hope!—wagons and cattle, human beings and household furniture, all mingled in horrible confusion!—some already ghastly in death, a few clinging feebly to whatever frail support chanced within reach!

With a prayer for their safety, Capt. Gunnison turned to meet a new danger to himself.

Another billow, higher than first mad surge, the one which further on swept little Lillian from her ledge, came rolling toward him, licking the canyon walls as if determined that nothing should escape!

Rushing up the incline that had promised him security, it mounted to his waist!

Frantically he tried to cling to the bare rock; but in the giant grasp of the monster his feeble strength was as nothing; and triumphantly it swept him away, to sink beneath the icy flood!

The waters, fearing to be cheated of their prey, became demons of fury. They shrunk from his clutch, and left emptiness beneath his tread. They buffeted him with their formless hands, made confusing Babel in his ears, and, when he would have gasped to relieve the furnace glowing in his breast, rushed pell-mell into his mouth, as if eager to seek the seat of life.

Now strange lights thrilled along his nerve of vision; strange sounds flowed down the avenues of hearing; strange intelligences came to every wondering sense; and when at last the waters parted above his head, and the air of heaven fanned his cheek, he scarce realized that he was indeed returned to the blessed elixir of life!

But nature was quick to resume her sway, and, without knowing just how, he found himself clinging to the trunk of a tree, and coughing the strangling water from his lungs, and realized that he was being borne with lightning speed between walls of rock that rose sheer to the lowering heavens.

Eagerly he strained his eyes on ahead, until suddenly the walls fell away on either hand—he had reached the mouth of the canyon!

In safety?

His soul yet thrilled with the question, when there was a shock; he was torn from the tree that had sustained him so long and so well; then came a stinging sense of agony that seemed to pervade his whole being, and—oblivion!

CHAPTER V.

A FIGHT WITH FIENDS.

WHEN the flood caught Jules St. Auburn, he was overwhelmed and torn from the back of his horse. As he struggled to the surface of the eddying maelstrom he was struck and partially stunned by what proved to be a wagon-body, which, at first jeopardizing his life, afterward proved his salvation.

Words cannot depict the horrors of that passage. A score of times he was sucked under by

the whirling currents. Again and again in that icy flood he suffered the agony of death, to come back to a dimly conscious life, where only instinct guarded his hold upon his uncertain support.

But through it all there was an anguish of horror that did not spring from present peril.

He saw Captain Gunnison, and shouted faintly to him. Afterward he caught a glimpse of the man who had made so brave an effort to save little Lillian Amberleigh. Then an angry wave dashed upon his head, bearing him down! down! into that hell of waters already strewn with the ghastly corpses of his late companions. When he emerged again, his eyes were wide and staring, foul with the impurities of the flood; on his face was stamped a horror as terrible as that frozen on the immobile visages of the dead!

From that immersion he brought no rational thought. To his distraught fancy it seemed that from rayless blackness the world suddenly burst into an all-enveloping conflagration. Above, the brazen heavens glowed with the fiery intensity of a furnace seven times heated, while from horizon to zenith it blazed with blending flashes of incessant lightning. Below, the earth stretched a vast plain of molten iron, lashed by furious hurricanes into wrathful billows, whose toppling crests were livid flames.

Strewn on this infernal sea lay the ghastly dead of all the earth, not writhing in wild-eyed anguish, but motionless, bloodless pale, with livid wounds, and half-closed eyes showing the bluish glaze of death—all the more horrible by reason of this strange insensibility. And for every corpse there was a fiend of horrid shape and devilish malignity.

As he arose to fly—whither he knew not, for this hell of horror extended on every hand as far as the eye could range—the demons espied him, and sprung upon him in countless legions, making the heavens re-echo with their diabolical cries.

Now he fought them hand to hand, with a savage fury that outrivaled that of his demon assailants, snatching strange weapons from their hands, and dealing all about him, with lightning rapidity, irresistible blows, before which they went down like grain before the sickle!

A wild exultation seized him, seeming to distend his body to gigantic proportions, until his foes were as pigmies by comparison. He yelled in delirious triumph. He drove them before him like chaff before the wind!

And now from the nethermost depths sprung up a shape more hideous than the wildest conjuration of a maniac's nightmare. Its awful cry drowned those of the lesser demons, and the ferocity of its assault was commensurate with its horrid aspect.

Before it they scattered in every direction, with cries of terror. The man who had conquered them, frozen with horror, was powerless to evade the attack.

The shock was terrific! He felt the arms of the monster close about him like triple bands of steel, crushing the life out of his body. With a sense of loathing unutterable he felt the cold, clammy contact of serpents! Their hisses pierced his ears; their fetid breath filled his nostrils; his eyes saw nothing but their wriggling bodies, quivering tongues, and glittering eyes!

A moment of such sickening horror, and the man must have expired in a shudder of loathing!—but he was lifted from his feet and hurled to the ground with a violence that nearly bereft him of consciousness.

But even in that frenzied moment Jules St. Auburn did not lose the instinct of the trained athlete. As agile as a cat, he tripped the monster in whose grasp he was as helpless as a child, then sprung to his feet, ready for flight.

At this instant a larger serpent, which the fallen monster carried in his hand like a wand or staff, sprung a coil about the ankle of the would-be fugitive. But a furious stamp on its head with his other foot relaxed the detaining fold, and the man darted away like the wind!

Was all this the conjuration of a delirious brain; or had Jules St. Auburn met the Ghost of the Canyon, and lived to escape?

Let us see!

Its dread work accomplished, the tempest fled away as suddenly as it had come. The black cloud-pall was swept from the face of the sky, discovering the sun resting on the western peaks and flooding the glad earth with warmth and brightness and beauty. Nature wore her fairest smiles, yet on the leaves hung pendent drops of crystal, like tearson the lashes of a coquettish beauty who woos you into forgiving and forgetting her momentary petulance.

But to one funereal spot there came no gladness! It was the *debouchure* of a mountain gorge, paved with water-washed sand, and strewn with the ghastly debris of an overwhelmed wagon-train.

There lay motionless the bodies of men and women and little children, with sand and weeds in their hair, in their glazed eyes, on their livid lips—and about them lay the wreck of things that told of home and happiness!

In the midst of the silent dead, one woman sat rocking the head of a bearded man on her breast, and, as she swayed to and fro, from her

lips rose in plaintive accents that lullaby with which all our mothers have soothed our troubled spirits to repose—

"Hush, my babe! Lie still and slumber,
Holy angels guard thy bed!"

Then came dusky forms from the neighboring rocks, and gathered round to gaze upon this piteous spectacle.

And hideous in war-paint, with their hands and weapons yet unwashed from carnage, the deadliest foes of her race and sex stood round, their savage instincts for the time in abeyance, and from lip to lip passed the word:

"Medicine!"

Among all Indians, the insane are held to be under the especial protection of the spirits of the unseen world; hence "medicine," or mystery, was an amulet which would protect Mrs. Amberleigh from personal danger.

Not so with Capt. Gunnison, if he proved to be alive.

Mrs. Amberleigh evinced no fear of the Utes; but as their chief bent over Capt. Gunnison to ascertain whether he was alive, while his braves scattered to despoil the dead, she cried:

"Oh! do not touch my baby! Hush—you will awaken it!"

Then, bending over the clammy face and kissing the sodden hair, she resumed her piteous lullaby—

"Heavenly blessings, without number,
Gently fall upon thy head!"

With firm, yet not harsh hands, the Ute chief unloosed the clasp of the poor deluded mother, and said in guttural English:

"Ugh! Pappoose heap sick! Injun fix 'um all right. No make 'um squal." "What! my baby sick?" cried the mother, with a startled look. "Is that why she lies so still and is so cold?"

"Powerful close call! Bully boy! Pull 'um t'rough all right," was the somewhat enigmatical, yet withal kindly, assurance of the Ute.

Then, pinching the hard muscles of Capt. Gunnison's leg, he made this rather startling announcement:

"Tough old buck! Injun have high old time! Make 'um good roast! Ugh! O. K., you bet!"

And he laughed a blood-curdling chuckle.

But now arose a great commotion. The savage robbers and mutilators of the dead come upon one whom the flood had spared.

With their barbarous cries they gathered around him, assailing him from every side, like dogs that have brought a stag to bay. And he fought them like a pallid demon, with a fury more intense, with cries wilder than their own, until they fled with superstitious terror before the maniac glitter of his eyes.

Then rose a cry that curdled the blood of every one that heard, and in their very midst sprung up a monster that had crept upon them from the mouth of the gorge, unnoticed in their preoccupation—a Thing so hideous that the savages forgot all else in their precipitate flight.

The fierzied white man and the snake-demon met in a terrible encounter, in which both went down. Then the man rose and fled. The monster was deterred from pursuit by a sweetly sad voice raised in a plaintive lullaby.

A moment later, the Thing stood beside the woman who crooned the song of infancy to a grown man, while she rocked his unconscious head on her bosom—stood with a strange hush upon it, as if that plaintive music soothed its demon nature.

So the night fell, and the darkness shrouded all!

Then from the mountains came a long-drawn howl, which was picked up and echoed and re-echoed on every side; and through the gloom crept skulking forms, with eyes that gleamed in the darkness like living coals. And the howls were interspersed with savage snarls and the click of snapping teeth.

The terrible cry of the demon scattered the mountain wolves for a moment; but soon they returned, and while they wrangled over their horrible feast, the cry of the Ghost of the Canyon sped further and further up the gorge, bearing—what?—through the darkness!

CHAPTER VI.

NOTICE TO QUIT.

"GENTS, that's no use talkin'—somethin's got to be did!"

Judge Wiggins—the "boys" called him judge perhaps for no better reason than that he was bald-headed and something of a demagogue—spoke decidedly.

The "boys" sat around in frowning silence, aiming tobacco-juice projectiles at the sawdust-filled spitbox with a sullen, dogged ferocity that bespoke their determination.

Sutler Bob, the "boss" of the No-tic Saloon, watched the proceedings a little anxiously, though he did not venture to interfere.

The man up-stairs, on whom this informal court was sitting in judgment, had certainly contributed largely to "make things lively" at the No-tic, and, by "goin' the hull figur," that is to say, paying for everything like a prince—money down and no questions—and "settin' 'em up all hands round" whenever the boys began to "look down in the mouth," had kept a

stream of "dust" flowing into Sutler Bob's money-till.

But the sovereigns of Hard Luck Camp had come to perceive that the interests of the No-tic and the community at large were, at least in this one case, inimical, and in convention assembled were deliberating what step would most conduce to the general welfare.

"Waal, gents," said Moxy, taking his immense quid of tobacco from his mouth into his hand and tossing it thence through the open doorway, "I've tramped this hyar mountain country from Virginia City to Los Angeles an' from Denver to Frisco; an' as far as I kin see it always comes to the same windin' up—these flash gents runs to the end o' their tether, an' then it's *git ur swing*."

"I reckon thar hain't no galecot in this hyar community what goes back on the pasteboards in the hands of a squar' man," said big Mose Finley, with an air half-apologetic, half-defiant; "but ef a doggoned clever *slight* don't come in some-whar in the operations o' the Frisco sharp, hang me if I wouldn't like to have his luck! I'd guarantee to rake every camp from hyar to sundown!"

And, by way of impressing his conviction on his auditors, he brought down upon the rude table at his elbow a fist as ponderous as one of his sledge-hammers, with a force that made the glasses behind the bar jingle.

"It's small matter to me," said Tom O'Connor, pulling hard at the stump of a clay pipe into which he had cut plug tobacco. "Divil an ounce have I had all winter to put up an the swate desavers, whin me wake's praties an' bacon was laid in—wid a toothful o' the crayther, d'ye moind! But I always back me mates ag'in' anny shtanger; so I say—'Give the dirthy blaggard his walkin' papers!' It's no loss he'd be to anny decent camp."

After this there was some bluster and profanity indulged in by men who had met the Frisco Sharp and come away with lighter pockets and heavier hearts. All declared stoutly that the loss of their gold-dust was a matter of perfect indifference to them—no true American will ever admit that he cares anything for money!—but still the sense of the assembly was that the obnoxious party be served with a notice to quit.

"I move that the judge pick out his own committee and fire the scalawag out!" said Moxy.

This somewhat unparliamentary proposition receiving the equally informal assent of the assembly, Judge Wiggins expressed his willingness to "give all the boys a show fur the fun," and left it to such as chose to follow him. The result was that the "committee" comprised the whole body-politic of Hard Luck.

"You'll find the gent up-stairs—asleep, I reckon," said Sutler Bob, his looks but poorly disguising his lack of sympathy, though his tongue was too wise to run counter of public sentiment so pronounced.

The "commitee" went for the carpetless stair, that creaked an ineffectual protest beneath their heavy tread.

Judge Wiggins pounded a rousing summons on the door of unplanned deal boards, which, secured imperfectly by loose linges and latch, shook and rattled as if about to fall to pieces.

From within came the involuntary sound of some one suddenly awakening from slumber, a slight rustle of straw, then a voice:

"Eh! Who's there? Come in!"

Judge Wiggins raised the latch—the door was not bolted—and walked into the chamber, followed by as many of his committee as could crowd their way in.

They found a small, square room, with uncarpeted pine floor, unpapered pine walls, and sloping pine ceiling, evidently the under side of the roof. This was lighted by a window containing four small panes of glass.

A rough pine bunk in one corner, a wooden-bottomed chair and half a dozen nails driven into the wall to serve as clothes hooks, comprised the furnishing of this far from Sybaritic apartment.

On the bunk a straw tick did service as a mattress; but over it were spread white sheets—a *luxury in Hard Luck Camp*!

Between the sheets, with one arm thrown indolently above his head, appeared a dainty gentleman in a ruffled night-shirt of fine cambric. Over the back of the chair were carefully arranged clothes in keeping, the outer garments being of the best quality of imported goods and most fashionably cut, the underclothes of the finest fabrics and most delicate workmanship. A pair of French boots stood beside the chair, their morocco legs falling limp, not standing stiff like the stogie boots common to a mining camp. Commodious leather saddle-bags lay open on the floor, disclosing ruffled and fluted shirts and dainty toilet articles.

From what appeared to them rather effeminate wearing-apparel, the miners turned with mingled contempt and anger to glower at the nonchalant gentleman who lay among his pillows with no appearance of surprise or uneasiness on his face.

The face was spare and sallow, with delicate, finely formed features and large, languid brows

eyes, the mouth being hid by a mustache trained to curve over and cover the lips, while a lock of fine, wavy black hair fell carelessly across the smooth forehead.

Over all was an air of dissipation and blase cynicism.

This is what an interval of ten years had made of Jules St. Auburn.

"Good-morning, gentlemen. I'm sorry I can't ask you all to be seated," said the Frisco Sharp, in tones of polished suavity; and with his white, aristocratic hand, blue-veined and taper-fingered, he drew the coverlet—a gray army blanket—so that the "solid men" of the party might sit, if so disposed, on the side of the bunk.

A cool reception this from a man who did not know but that the "committee" had waited upon him for the purpose of taking him out and suspending him to the nearest red-wood tree!

Every man in the room appreciated the wonderful nerve that made possible this careless ease in the face of probable ignominious death. As Moxy afterward expressed it:

"Fur unadulterated sand, the Frisco Sharp takes the cake!"

Even Judge Wiggins was disconcerted and at a loss how to proceed for a moment. Then he cleared his throat and said:

"As we've come on business, you needn't put yourself out to give us no French frills nor fancy flounces. They're all right; but they ain't in our line. Ye see, the boys has made up their minds that the air o' Hard Luck is bad fer delicate constitutions; and they think that a gent of about your figur' would find it money in pocket to travel fur his health. We hain't recommendin' no partic'lar locality. North, south, east or west—anywhar, in fact, say ten mile away from the No-tie."

During the address the face of the Frisco Sharp was a study.

His eyes slowly contracted, as they rested calmly, unwaveringly on the face of the speaker. A suspicion of a smile lurked about his mouth. Perhaps his lip curled slightly beneath his overhanging mustache.

"Thar's only one pint that we come down on heavy," pursued Judge Wiggins; "but thar Hard Luck lays herself out, you bet! Ef a gent is invited to step down and out, it's understood that he takes all his baggage with him, so's thar won't be nothin' to come back fur, unless he takes to hankerin' after the grand bounce. For if he's ketched inside o' the city limits afterward, bet yer life Hard Luck 'll set down on him like a ten-acre brick-yard!"

"That's gospel!" growled big Mose Finley, with a supplemental oath.

"Divil a less!" seconded Tom O'Connor.

And a rambling assent proceeded from others in the room and out in the hall within the sound of Judge Wiggins's voice.

The Frisco Sharp coolly turned himself on his pillows, so that he could, with the least effort, look at his frowning judges, from the foot of his bed to the doorway through which were thrust the frowzy heads of many who could not gain admittance for their bodies, and scanning them calmly—indeed with some of the curiosity with which one looks at a menagerie of caged beasts—replied:

"Gentlemen, I thank you for the distinguished honor conferred upon me, by the citizens of this flourishing hamlet waiting upon me in a body; also for the delicacy with which your able exponent and fellow-townsmen has hinted that a change of residence on my part would be agreeable to gentlemen whose favor I have made it my study to conciliate, it seems with ill success. But in such cases I trust I shall ever be public-spirited enough to yield gracefully to the sentiment of the majority. May I ask how long I shall be permitted to enjoy the hospitalities of Hard Luck Camp by the grace of its enterprising citizens?"

"Waal, we hain't in no sweat," said the judge. "Three or four hours ought to be enough time for a man to git in. Eh, boys?"

The "boys" growled their concurrence.

"What time is it now?" asked the Frisco Sharp, suppressing a yawn behind his hand, adding apologetically:—"My watch is inconvenient to get at beneath my pillow."

"Nine o'clock," replied the judge.

"Then I won't be disturbed before noon?"—with relief in tone and look.

"Ef we don't find nobody to swing at one, we'll put the rope on the shelf!" was the sententious response.

"Thank you," said the Frisco Sharp, settling himself for a renewed nap. "As you go down, will you oblige me by sending up the landlord?"

But the "boys" were curious to see the end of this matter, wondering what this cool gentleman would have to say to Sutler Bob; and one of their number shouted at the top of his stentorian lungs:

"Ho!—the landlord!—hand 'im up this way!"

"Sutler Bob wanted!"

"Step right up to the captain's office!"

"Make way thar! Chassez him to the front!"

"Hyar comes the cherub!"

"Go in, Bob, an' do the honors o' Hard Luck!"

"We're with ye, ole man!"

Such were a few of the cries that went down

the hall and stairs; and with much jostling and profanity—no matter, public or private, was ever, without a free indulgence of the latter, consummated in that delectable country! Sutler Bob struggled through the crowd, and presented himself before his guest.

"Ah, landlord! Sorry to trouble you," said the Frisco Sharp in his most indolent manner.

"But I have just received an unexpected summons which will compel me to forego the hospitalities of your excellent house. Call me at twenty minutes of twelve will you? And, by the way, landlord, lay yourself out on a square meal. I shall want a solid base of operations for my journey. Give my horse a good grooming. Meanwhile, if any of these gentlemen care to drink, enter it on my account."

"All right, boss," said Sutler Bob, hoping privately that the "boys" would not be deterred by any fine scruples from drinking at the expense of the man they had just "bounced."

"And now, gentlemen," said Frisco Sharp, "I will bid you good-morning, and to such as I may not meet again, good-by. You all have my best wishes. And better luck in the next stranger that chance sends to your door."

So saying, with the most winning of smiles, he turned his face to the wall.

The "committee" withdrew.

"Nobody had nothing to say!"

At twenty minutes of twelve the Frisco Sharp was called—made a faultless toilet—descended and ate his dinner leisurely and with an evident relish—mounted his horse—waved a graceful adieu to the crowd assembled to see him off, big Mose Finley with a coil of rope in readiness presenting a most suggestive feature—and disappeared among the pines at one sharp!

Twenty-four hours later this man, to whom danger and death were idle jests, was riding with his usual ease and nonchalance through a canyon of the mighty Sierras, when his horse suddenly stopped, tossed his head, sniffed the air, and refused to advance.

"Eh? Balking? What's the matter with the beast?"

And the Frisco Sharp put spurs to his refractory steed.

The animal reared and tried to turn round; but the man conquered in the brief struggle, and again dug his spurs into the horse's quivering flanks.

The animal made a single bound, then stood as if rooted to the spot, trembling in every nerve, his head high, his ears pricked forward, his eyes blazing.

Then from among the crags sprung up an object of such terrible aspect that man and beast were paralyzed by the sight.

The Frisco Sharp had seen this thing once before among the weird conjurings of delirium. Now a shudder of horror and loathing ran through that frame which had never thrilled with fear before any peril that man could devise.

Jules St. Auburn stood face to face with the Ghost of the Canyon!

CHAPTER VIII.

FALLEN IN AMBUSH.

For a moment the Frisco Sharp and the Ghost of the Canyon stood voiceless and motionless, regarding each other.

Then from a gorge that opened at right angles into the canyon came the sound of firearms, the rattle of shots blending with savage war-cries.

The Ghost of the Canyon turned its head as if to listen; then, with a yell that made the rocky walls of the canyon resound, turned and rushed up the gorge in the direction of the fighting.

The horse of the Frisco Sharp wheeled and bore him—perhaps nothing loth—in the opposite direction, at a runaway pace.

But let us precede the Ghost of the Canyon, and learn the cause of battle.

"Waal, darn my hide, cap'n, ef we ain't in jest a leetle the tightest box that ever was put up on white men!"

"I'm afraid you're right, Judd."

"Right? Waal, I reckon! Them ole tanbarks is on their reg'lar spring rampage—begun a leetle airly this year, along o' the open weather—an' bound to keep it up all summer. This hyar's a powerful 'commodatin' government, a-stockin' them ole leather-faces with shootin'-irons an' ammunition to salt ginowine free American citizens with! Dog my cats, ef I wouldn't like to hev some o' them thar gosh-hanged fools what run the Injun Burer—run it into the ground, cuss 'em!—I'd like to hev one or two o' 'em right hyar now, an' set 'em up fer targets fer ole Dick's hand an' his gang o' pets to sling cold lead into. Thar'd be some sense in that. Praps their chin-music 'ud be in another key at the next settin' o' Congress. I tell ye what it is, cap'n, thar's nothin' in this hyar world like a man's takin' his own physic, fer to straighten out his ideas. Ef he kin keep the dose on his own stomick, he kin bet heavy every time that the thing's squar'. But fer a lot of ole stoughten-bottles to set two or three thousand miles off—keepin' their own hides safe, ye understand!—an' tell a man

what's got his skin riddled like a pepper-box that he ain't hurt, an' thar ain't no danger, an' the Injuns is sweet-smellin' angels right out o' Heaven, bless 'em!—why it don't stand to reason that— Eh? A new move!"

The man addressed as "Cap'n" pays no attention to the grumbling of the old mountaineer, Judd Baker; but, with his arms folded across his breast and his brows deeply corrugated with lines of anxious thought, he stands looking straight before him down the mountain gorge.

Following his glance, we can see only the deep-green pines, waving gently in the breeze—a peaceful scene enough; but about the leader are gathered anxious-browed men, with firearms in their hands and a hunted watchfulness in their eyes—some wearing blood-stained bandages, two lying on the ground—one of them ominously still, rigid, ghastly, and one heroically striving to stifle the moans wrung from his white lips by anguish that makes his limbs writhe in spite of him; and in the midst of this little band, surrounded by horses whose bodies are intended to protect her from the bullets of the ruthless foe that lurks in yonder fair-seeming coverts, is a maiden of ethereal beauty—now pale and trembling, and with her startled eyes ever seeking the commanding figure of the man whose leadership calls him to the front of danger, though she longs to have him at her side.

Ten years have changed her much, developing the sunny-haired child into a fair young girl of sweet sixteen, with the first harbingers of budding womanhood in face and figure; but in the man of thirty-two, or thereabouts, we easily recognize the full fruition of the promise of the youth who bore little Lillian Amberleigh in that terrible ride before the pursuing horror of the Death Canyon!

But, on a second glance, we discover a change which those ten years have wrought.

When first we saw him, his face was lined with that gloomy defiance which ever marks the passage of a crushing disappointment or a soul-corroding wrong; now, in spite of the anxiety of the moment, there is in his face and general carriage a grand uplifting which bespeaks a strong, hopeful life purpose.

A word of explanation will bridge the interval of ten years since that terrible night in Death Canyon.

Both the Gentleman from Pike and the old scout, Judd Baker, escaped its perils. Their first quest in the morning was at the mouth of the gorge, to see if succor might be afforded to any unfortunates of the overwhelmed wagon-train. But from the horrible spectacle that there awaited them they turned away, sick at heart.

The Gentleman from Pike believed that Mrs. Amberleigh had fallen a prey to the wolves.

As for the old scout, remembering the terrible Cries of the Demon of the Canyon, as it passed him in the darkness in its ascent of the gorge after the flood, he shook his head and said:

"Waal, cap'n, maybe them was sure-enough wolves, an' maybe they was only a blind. Ef the Ghost o' the Canyon took a notion to chaw up them poor critters, I reckon he could easy enough hocus-pocus sham wolves to throw folks off the scent. Howsomdever, that's only my say-so, an' I'm free to allow that I don't set up to know everything."

The demon had passed the Gentleman from Pike, too; and it was a mystery on which he never expressed an opinion. He could not wholly repress a shudder when he thought of it.

For ten years he had given himself to the care of the orphan child so strangely thrown upon his protection; and she had repaid him a thousand-fold with her love.

And now let us see what caused the sudden interruption in Judd Baker's criticism of the policy of the Indian Commissioners.

From the shadow of the pines emerged a dusky figure, made rather barbarous and dangerous looking by the paint and feathers and fringe of human scalp-locks, which made up the war-trappings of the noble American Indian.

In his hand he waved a ramrod, to which was attached a dirty rag which "smelt very loud" of army blanket, considering that it was now presented as a flag of truce. No doubt its former owner was laid where no war's alarms will ever again stir his dull ear!

"It's old Dick himself!" exclaimed Judd Baker; "an' when he wants a talk you may bet thar's some devilment back of it."

"Well, I suppose I will have to accommodate him," said the leader, handing his repeating rifle to one of his men, but retaining his pistols.

But there came an unlooked-for interruption.

"Oh, brother Will!"

And all turned toward the white-lipped little lady, whose heart had leaped forth in that anxious protest.

"Well, Lillie?" said he, who had been to her father and—no, not mother; for in that relation she had wept a tender memory during all those ten years.

"Don't go!—don't go!" she pleaded now, with clasped hands and tearful eyes. "Oh! if there should be treachery!"

A tender, inward light irradiated the face of the leader, as he gazed upon her, who forgot all else in her solicitude for him.

"Do not fear, little sister," he said. "There is really no danger; and my duty calls me to act."

But, all atremble, she pressed her eager way through the horses and came to him, putting her arm about his waist.

"Let me go with you then," she urged. "If you leave me, you will never come back! I know it!—I feel it."

And gazing into that upturned face with its quivering lips and tear-swimming eyes, this man, from whose sore heart her gentle ministrations had gradually wooed all the bitterness and distrust, smiled with a rare sweet smile, and stroked her hair with a lingering fondness, and touched his lips to her wet cheek with a reverent tenderness that left his own eyes humid.

There were others touched by her devotion—rude men whose hearts were yet "in the right place."

Beneath his burr-oak exterior Judd Baker felt quickening emotions which he would have been ashamed to acknowledge, though they were, in truth, evidences of his sterling manhood.

"Look a-hyar, cap'n," he said, fidgeting nervously, "I'm the man to go out an' meet that p'izen critter. Ef they rub me out, nobody's the wuss fur it. But jest you stay back an' mind this hyar lettle rose-bud. Gosh-all-fish-hooks! ef I had any woman-critter—"

But Judd suddenly left off in hopeless confusion.

The Gentleman from Pike smiled, and said:—"Thank you, Judd. You mean all right. But you must know that my little girl is as brave as the best of you, and would be the last one to wish me to shirk my duty, when she takes a second thought."

"Return to your place, dear. It would take all the manhood out of me to feel that you were not hedged about by all the safeguards at our command."

Again he touched her cheek lightly, disengaged her clinging hands, and waited to see her return to the scant shelter of the horses. Even there, there was danger of her being trampled upon, if the animals became unmanageable.

The girl obeyed in silence, only following him with her fond eyes as he strode boldly forth.

The Ute chief was a grim-looking old cut-throat, who owed his humorous *sobriquet* to a certain dilapidated straw hat in which he had strutted about the Indian agency during the making of one of the many treaties, boasting insolently that he had taken it, along with the scalp it had covered, from the head of a "big white chief."

Now, with a facetiousness which he had caught from contact with the reckless mountain men, with whom the gravest situation is not free from its jest, he said, with a guttural chuckle:

"Ugh! Got 'um big white chief darn tight!"

Truth to tell, the noble red-man delivered himself of an uncompromising Western oath; but out of deference to the amenities of polite literature, we euphemize it into that substitute with which Brother Jonathan has sought to cheat the devil, while enjoying, in its essence, the luxury of profane swearing.

"Did you call me out here to tell me that?" ask the Gentleman from Pike coldly.

The savage shrugged his shoulders, then said, with a sly watchfulness in his black eyes:

"White chief do squar' t'ing by Dick Hat-band, let 'um go, maybe! No git out nasty hobbie, if don't let 'um go. Knock 'em socks off from white chief—take 'em scalp, white brave, every son-of-a-gun! Ante up—let 'um go?"

"What do you want?" demanded the Gentleman from Pike.

"Dick Hat-band powerful big chief. Reckon 'um got nice warm wigwam," said the savage, watching the effect of this feeler.

"Well?" asked Carleton, at a loss to divine whither it tended.

"S'pose white chief give 'um darn fine squaw? Heap tender, like prairie hen. Yum—yum! Dick Hat-band bully old boy! Like 'um young squaw pooty good!"

And the chief laughed—a horrible laugh to one who knew the unspeakable sufferings to which white women have in hundreds of cases been subjected upon falling into Indian captivity.

At first the Gentleman from Pike did not comprehend his meaning; then, as the terrible truth dawned upon his mind, a wave of fury and a thrill of agony swept through his soul; and with a savage oath he sprung forward and raised his fist to fell the barbarian to the earth.

Dick's Hat-band leaped back with a startled cry.

Bang! went the rifle of some hot-headed savage, the bullet putting two holes in and out of the white man's buckskin jerkin, just under the arm, and scorching a rib in its passage.

This narrow escape brought the enraged man to his senses, and he instantly raised his hand to check a fusillade from his followers.

It was a "ticklish" situation. Neither the Gentleman from Pike nor Dick's Hat-band had ever been in greater jeopardy.

After a moment of terrible suspense, the danger passed.

"Give 'um squaw, let 'um go, all right," persisted the Indian. "No ante squaw, take 'um all same—rake 'um board."

Controlling his anger, the other said:

"Go back to your devils, and do your worst; but understand, you cannot touch a hair of that girl's head until you hold the scalp of every man that can raise a hand to protect her!"

And he turned on his heel.

A sullen frown settled down on the bronzed visage of the savage.

"All right! Take 'um all same! Look out! Dick Hat-band darn bad pill when 'um got blood in eye!"

And muttering these threats, little in accord with the poetical utterances that Cooper has given us, this modern king of the forest stalked back with angry stride to his skulking myrmidons.

The Gentleman from Pike did not explain the nature of the abortive negotiation. Her ears awaited the horrible tale as eagerly as anybody's. He only said:

"It's fight to the death! And men, in God's name! never give up while you have a drop of blood in your veins!"

They saw the suppressed agony that wrung great beads of sweat from his brow and gave that wild appeal to his eyes; and, though it was unintelligible to her—ah! would she not have swooned with horror, had she been able to read those signs aright?—to those who were versed in Indian character came a slow consciousness, until they set their teeth and turned their blazing eyes one upon another, and then and there, mutely, they swore never to abandon her while life lasted!

An ominous quiet reigned on the part of the savages.

As for the whites, hemmed in in that mountain pocket, they could hope for nothing until the coming of nightfall.

But the danger came long before the darkness.

There was a rattle of firearms from overhead, and the patter of bullets, many of which found their mark, as cries from men and horses told.

"They have gained the heights!" cried the leader. "We can stay here no longer. They could pick off every man of us in half an hour. We have but one chance. We must ride through yonder ambush! Mount, men! A few of us may escape! Remember!—as long as there is one man left, he must protect this poor child!"

"We swear to do that, cap'n!" shouted Judd Baker.

And from lip to lip ran the pledge:

"We swear!"

"Judd!" cried the Gentleman from Pike, wringing his hand with an agony that was beyond words, "it is my place to lead! Take her and keep her in the center! Do not leave her side, I charge you!"

"Cap'n, you kin tie to ole Judd Baker, every time!" was the assurance of the honest mountaineer.

Then all leaped into the saddle, with Lilian Amberleigh in the middle.

There was no time for leave-taking, when every moment of delay cost a life.

Awed by the giant emotions that swept away these strong men, the girl obeyed every injunction without demur, nor did she seek to divert from his higher duties, to herself, the attention of the man toward whom her heart went out now as never before.

"CHARGE!" thundered the leader.

In a compact body they swept down into that hell of carnage!

CHAPTER VIII.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

Down into that vale of withering death swept the devoted band!

Guiding his horse by his knees, the bridle-rein hanging loose, the commander led the van, with a cocked revolver in either hand.

Not a foe was in sight, but well they knew that death lurked behind every bowlder, every pine!

It came!

A hundred vivid flashes!—a hundred puffs of white, sulphurous smoke!—a hundred sharp reports that filled the crags with rattling echoes!—a hail of whistling bullets!—the agonized cries of wounded men and horses!—the rearing, plunging steed; the rider toppling from his saddle!—a chorus of blood-curdling yells, as if the demon hordes of Tartarus had burst its iron bound!—then hell un veiled its horrors, and the fiends of destruction held high carnival!

Like the fabled warriors that sprung armed cap-a-pie from the earth at the stamp of the mailed heel of their leader, every rock, every copse seemed to yield its dusky brave.

Not, as of old, with flying missiles—the arrows and tomahawks of their fathers—did these modern lords of the forest fill the air; but in their hands were trusty rifles, with which this strangely magnanimous government arms its foes for

the slaughter of its citizens, and revolvers which they used with a deadly skill not inferior to that of many of the whites.

But many a plumed and painted savage went down before the concentrated fire of Lilian Amberleigh's sworn defenders, the yell of defiance ending in the death-rattle; and more than one dusky warrior was beaten to the earth by the iron hoofs of those madly charging steeds!

On either hand the revolvers of the Gentleman from Pike flashed incessantly, until the hammers descended upon caps that had already set in train the doom of some yelling demon.

Then Lilian Amberleigh, whose eyes had never for an instant wandered from her brave champion, saw him sway in his saddle and put his hand to his breast.

A cry of anguish and terror leaped from her blanched lip.

"Oh, Will! Will! He is struck! In Heaven's name, save him!"

She dug her tiny spur into her horse's flank; and with great bounds he forced his way through his fellows that hedged him about, and bore his rider to the side of the man who braved all for her sake and for whom she would as readily have laid down her life.

Hard hit, the commander clutched at his saddle-horn, that he might not fall beneath the hoofs of his own followers' steeds, to await the scalping knife of the ruthless red butcher!

But a deadly vertigo paralyzed his brain; the world spun round; the air became suddenly filled with flakes of ebony blackness; the sounds of carnage seemed muffled and receding in the distance: all conscious things were slipping from his grasp.

Was this death?

Even then his thought was of her.

Was she safe?

"Oh, God! will Judd Baker fail of his trust?"

As if conjured by the mighty travail of his soul, the woman, beside whom all the world else sunk into insignificance, suddenly appeared at his side, a cry of unspeakable anguish on her lips; her distended eyes glassy with horror and dread unutterable; her frail arms about his tottering form!

Dimly he perceived her.

"Thank God! she is safe yet! Heaven protect her to the end!" was the aspiration of his soul.

But Judd!—where was he? Had he fallen? Was she left entirely alone?

"Go! Leave me!" murmured the Gentleman from Pike, the words falling heavy from his reluctant tongue.

He felt her clasp him more closely; then he seemed to fall from the frail support of her faithful bosom, and all consciousness left him.

But the brave man was not to be left to the mutilation of the savage scalping-knife.

Staunch Judd Baker had followed Lilian, urging his horse to Carleton's other side; and now his stout arm encircled the tottering form of the wounded leader, plucking it from the embrace of the girl, who otherwise would have been borne from her saddle by its too great weight—but never, oh, never would she have abandoned it!

"Oh, Judd! Judd!" screamed the affrighted girl. "See! he is dying! Help! help! Oh! cannot something be done? See how ghastly he is! Oh, Judd! Oh, Heavenly Father! His eyes are closing! He is dead! He is dead! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

She was wild with grief. She lost sight of every danger to herself. In that mad dash she might be borne from her horse's back by the limb of some tree. She heeded nothing. She looked only at the man in whose loss all the world seemed blotted out.

No words could console such despair. Her safety was the one thing to be struggled for now.

"At 'em, boys! Waste no shots! Give 'em Hail Columbia!" yelled sturdy Judd Baker, the blood already streaming over his face from a wound in the head. "Push ahead, fellers, an' give us the center! I'll look out fer the cap'n. Guard! guard, thar! That devil's reachin' fer Miss Lilian!"

In that wild *mêlée* they fought like Titans; but they were outnumbered ten to one.

When the savage bullet found its mark and the gallant rider reeled in his saddle, they had not their leader's good fortune—no Judd Baker was at hand to sustain them.

So their ranks were thinned until there were not enough left to surround Lilian as they had done at the outset. Thus she was left exposed to savage assault.

But the Indians had received their orders from their chief—the white squaw was to be captured alive and unharmed, and reserved to grace the wigwam of the great Dick's Hat-band.

And now Judd Baker's warning cry was elicited by the sudden appearance of the chief himself directly in the path of the little band that was so desperately fighting its way to life and liberty.

More than this, the dusky *inam-rato* had his hand on Lilian's bridle-rein, and already his repulsive visage was aglow with a horrible triumph.

In the midst of that awful carnage such as

civilization never knows, with savage foemen leaping up on every hand, seeming to multiply the deeper their ranks were penetrated—deafened by the rattle of firearms and the blood-curdling yells voiced by those painted barbarians, blinded and stifled by the incessant flashes and the white smoke, and sickened by the sight of blood—Lilian recognized her awful peril.

Then, incumbered as he was by the dead weight of the now unconscious commander, Judd Baker freed one hand, and fired.

Dick's Hat-band went down like a forest tree before the lightning's stroke!

But the fall of the chief did not make a victory. The little band was surrounded, their charge checked, their ranks thrown into confusion! The rider was shot from his horse—the horse sunk dying beneath his rider! On foot or in the saddle, a score of weapons were opposed to every breast! They who had fought so well were overwhelmed by numbers, and still their foes multiplied about them. Another moment would bring annihilation!

Stunned by a blow on the head which nearly toppled him from his horse, Judd Baker, the bravest scout in the mountains, abandoned all hope! After his adventurous life, he now stood in the presence of death unabashed, and regretting only the girl whom his arm was now powerless to save.

But, man failing, Heaven interposed!

Through that glade of death now rung a cry so terrible that it stayed the madly bounding blood in every heart.

Dimly Judd Baker heard it, and, half-conscious as he was, shuddered through every nerve!

Then came the dismayed yells of the savages, and the sudden cessation of strife. Before the awful Ghost of the Canyon all lesser interests were merged in the blind instinct of self-preservation.

But that cry had fired anew Judd Baker's sinking consciousness. He dug his spurs into his horse's flanks, and was borne forward with great bounds.

As for Lilian Amberleigh, her great love had conquered even that terrible cry at which the hearts of all men quailed. Of herself, of her surroundings, she thought nothing. Her horrified eyes were immovably fixed on her guardian; and so was she spared the sight of the awful monster.

From her lip ever came the cry:

"Is he dead? oh! is he dead?"

And so a scant half-dozen—not a quarter of those that had started!—burst through that cordon of death, and swept down the mountain pass.

But the Gentleman from Pike—was he dead?

CHAPTER IX.

"HARD LUCK'S" HARD LUCK.

"I TELL ye what it is, gents—it's mighty slim pickin's, considerin' the resk!"

Hard Luck Camp was "blue"—mighty "blue!"

At ten o'clock in the morning the miners were lounging before the No-tic Saloon, canvassing the unpromising outlook.

One was leaning against the door-post, with his feet crossed and his hands thrust deep in his pockets. Another was perched on the horse-trough, hacking idly with his bowie-knife. A third was balancing himself on the hitching bar. A fourth, with his hands clasped at the back of his head, lay at length on a board which was given a slight incline by one end resting on a stone.

So we might continue to enumerate the listless, almost despondent, attitudes of the men.

Judge Wiggins alone boasted the dignity of a sort of chair improvised from an old lemon-box, the partition in the middle of which served as a seat.

After a somewhat protracted deliberation, during which he scraped the spatters of clay from his pantaloons with his finger-nail, the judge straightened up, tipped his hat a little further back on his head, and said, decidedly:

"Gents, there's no two ways about it. Hard Luck's played. It's git, or bust!"

A gloomy silence followed this dictum, while the judge ran his eye anxiously, speculatively, from one clouded face to another.

"I reckon it's busted, anyway," one finally roused himself sufficiently to say.

"I'm down to bed rock," announced Moxy, giving the horse-trough a vicious jab with his bowie.

"Divil a glint o' gold have I fasted me two eyes on this two wakes," said Tom O'Connor, from where he lay on his broad back. "I'm beginnin' to hunt the praties in the pot wid a foin-tooth comb. Divil fly away wid me, av it's a loi I'm tellin' yez!"

"Waal, what d'ye say?" asked the judge, putting the question, as it were, to the house.

No definite statement was necessary. Everybody understood the issue only too well.

No one, it seemed, liked to assume the responsibility of what all felt must come. Their bearded lips were compressed and—mute.

"Gentlemen," said the judge, as if summing up the situation, "in the shed back o' the house there's a stiff with no hair on its head and nigh

onto a pound o' cold lead—fourteen ounces, to speak by the mark—in its carcase, takin' no account o' some mighty ugly carvin'."

"I brung it in," said Wind River Johnny, taking the word as if it were meet that each should testify what came within his immediate knowledge. "I reckon everybody knowed him—Shif'less Sol. No great shakes of a handle, but good enough on a pinch, I reckon. A restless sort of a cuss, all the time rammin' around, hither an' yon, allowin' he'd drop onto somethin' big some'r's one o' these days; but a white man, fur all that. Waal, I run acrost him up on the divide. Fourteen bullet-holes an' pinned to the ground with his pick drove through his bread-basket ain't bad, for one man!"

"Waal," says I to myself, 'the boys has poo-pooed this thing. I reckon it'll do 'em good to see a specimen. P'raps they'll allow, byme-by, that the Injuns means business.'

"So I packs the thing into camp. Thar it is, gents. You kin look it over fur yourselves. It ain't every day that you see daylight let into a man with fourteen slugs and a pick!"

Having presented what he deemed an unanswerable argument, Windy "subsided."

Judge Wiggins resumed the case.

"You've hyeard the evidence, gentlemen. We have the promise of hard knocks, sure, an' a doggone slim show fur pay-dirt. Ef we're boxed up hyere, thar'll be some tall scramblin' fur rations with some of us—perhaps all. Thar's no use bein' mealy-mouthed about it. We've got to face the music. Thar hain't no more crawfish in me than in the next one; but—"

And here the judge stopped, and looked about questioningly on his auditors.

There was an awkward pause.

"Waal, what's the word?" repeated the judge, finally.

Then big Mose Finley jumped down from the hitching-bar, shook himself together, and said:

"Gents, it mought as well come fust as last. It's up stakes, an' git!"

A sigh of relief ran through the crowd. The dead lethargy seemed to lighten.

"Air you all agreed?" asked Justice Wiggins, as if addressing a jury.

"Boss, I foller suit!"

"I'm in, you bet!"

"I never go back on the majority!"

"It's the best I've got!"

And with like expressions all intimated their concurrence.

One man had stood in the door of the No-tic Saloon, awaiting the result of the deliberation with no slight interest. He now spoke for the first time.

"Boys, you ain't going to shake me?"

"Not much, Bob. You're a squar' man, ef you air a Sutler; an' that's sayin' a good deal, bet yer life! You're solid in this camp!"

Others seconded this hearty assurance; and Bob smiled with gratification.

"Come in an' git a starter, gents," he said, throwing wide his door; "an' while you're knockin' your shanties to pieces, I'll git ye a squar' meal all hands round. Then we'll load the No-tic on her trucks, an' be ready to pull out on a full stomick."

Sutler Bob knew the kind of eloquence that would strike Hard Luck Camp "whar it lived." With a cheer, which showed that the spirits of the Camp were in the ascendant the moment it "smelt liquor," the "boys" ranged themselves along the bar, where Bob "set 'em up handsome!"

Then all went out to "pull up stakes."

The migrations of Western shanty towns are without parallel. What in the morning glories in the name of a city may ere night be piled upon wagons and wheeled to another site.

So, as if by magic, save for the clatter of hammers, Hard Luck Camp fell to pieces like a lot of card houses; and by the middle of the afternoon the "boys" had "got outside" of Sutler Bob's "squar' meal" and put the first hammer to the No-tic.

But there came an interruption.

Judge Wiggins, already astride the ridge-pole in his shirt-sleeves, cried:

"The Lord bless us and save us! what's this?"

And into Hard Luck Camp—what was left of it—rode a handful of blood-stained and bleeding men, and a girl whose fair face was blanched with unspeakable woe!

"Hallo, strangers! What's up?" demanded big Mose Finley.

"Bear a hand, gents. Work first, an' talk afterwards!" said Judd Baker, slipping from his jaded horse, and still holding the unconscious Carleton in his arms.

"A dead man?" asked Judge Wiggins, who, having descended from his elevated perch "on the run," now elbowed his way to the front.

"Oh, no! no!" cried Lilian Amberleigh, distractedly. "He is not dead!"—he cannot be dead!"

Her musical voice, veined as it was with keen distress, drew every eye upon her, and her exquisite beauty thrilled every one of those rude hearts with a sudden heroism. A moment ago they would have met danger and death with the energy of despair; now they were ready to fight like gods in defense of this helpless woman. Then the unconscious man had been to them "a

stiff;" now, knowing that the blow that struck him had pierced her heart, they glowed with a fierce thirst for revenge.

While they bore the Gentleman from Pike to the room lately tenanted by the 'Frisco Sharp, and installed Lilian as nurse, Judd Baker related in brief the danger through which they had passed, and which yet threatened the mining-camp.

The story of the opportune coming of the Ghost of the Canyon filled every one with superstitious dread, and speculation concerning it ran riot.

As for the danger from an Indian attack, Hard Luck had been "ketch'd with her traces down;" but in a twinkling she was under arms and assembled in fighting trim. Though the apprehension of danger was great, it was fairly rivaled by curiosity about William Carleton and his fair nurse. Of the latter Judd Baker had nothing to say, but of the former he said:

"I reckon some o' you has heard o' the Gentleman from Pike. Up North they allow that he's the biggest fightin' man in the country. No blab-mouth, ye understand; but a gent that a regiment o' grizzlies couldn't crowd. Waal, boys, he's all O. K. He's got a hard knock; but he'll weather it in a week.

"An' now the first thing in order is a scout. I see that you was all ready to shake this place; but I'll bet you two to one that ye don't git out o' this valley fur thirty days."

Judd Baker's suggestion was acted upon, and the scouts returned with the report that the mountain pass swarmed with savages. Hard Luck would have to put herself "in shape" for a siege of indefinite duration.

But during their absence a new complication had arisen. The sky had become overcast with a dull gray cloud.

"Gents," said Judd Baker, "I've seen this sort o' thing before. Ef you take my advice, you'll fall to, all hands, and put up them shanties, as quick as hammer an' nails'll do the job!"

Even as he spoke great feathery flakes of snow began to fall silently down through the still air; and the "boys," who hadn't lived in the mountains for nothing, set to work with an equal energy, if not with the same hearty goodwill, to put up in the evening, the shanties they had knocked to pieces in the morning.

The work was hastily, and therefore slightly done; but when the scouts came wading back through the snow in the early nightfall, they found that their homes had sprung up again, as if by magic.

No explanation was necessary. All knew that it might snow for a day, or a week, or even longer, without cessation, and that the passes to the outer world might be blocked by twenty, thirty, forty, fifty feet of those feathery particles.

And, true to this portent, the time came when Hard Luck found itself shut in from all the world, and communication between the shanties maintained only by digging through constantly deepening banks of snow.

But an event of fateful moment occurred before they had been buried thus deeply.

On the fourth day of the falling snow, as the shadows of night were approaching, an object was discovered moving slowly, laboriously toward the camp. It was so covered with snow that it could not be made out; but it looked like an animal of some sort.

"A bear's cub, most likely," suggested Moxy to his wondering companions.

"Not much!" asserted big Mose Finley, positively. "Anyway, here goes fur a shot over its head; and we'll see how it takes the joke."

And without waiting for more prudent counsels—for it ill-behoved men situated as they were to run the risk of scaring away anything that gave promise of food—he fired.

The object stopped, squatted on its haunches, raised its fore-limbs, and uttered a faint cry.

"Good God! a man!" cried the astonished marksman.

It was indeed a man, creeping on hands and knees where it would have been impossible for him to walk erect, and thus making his way slowly toward deliverance from an awful peril.

He renewed his efforts; but with the knowledge that help was near, the high tension at which he had held himself relaxed, and he sunk forward exhausted.

But human eyes had beheld his strait, and human hearts beat with quick sympathy. Big Mose Finley sprang to the rescue, crying:

"Come on, boys!"

And his strong limbs broke the path for the rest to follow in.

They reached the fallen man. Mose Finley lifted him up, gazed into his face, and—dropped him!—more than that, with a round oath!

"Boys, it's the Frisco Sharp!"

CHAPTER X.

THE OUTCAST'S RETURN.

"Boys, it's the Frisco Sharp!"

Such was the announcement of big Mose Finley, as with an oath he dropped the helpless man whom he had just raised.

A moment his lips were compressed, his brows indented, with cruel hatred. Then, without a word further, he turned and retraced his steps.

over the way he had come a moment before on an errand of humanity.

The "boys" hesitated, glanced at one another, and silently, sullenly followed the steps of their leader, leaving the Frisco Sharp where he had fallen in the snow!

"Why, what is the matter? Wasn't it a man?"

All started at the sweet voice, the questioning eyes, that greeted their return.

Mose Finley said not a word, but set his teeth in dogged ferocity.

The rest of the "boys" fidgeted uneasily. Tom O'Connor replied:

"Well, yis, ma'am; thrue fur you, it was in-dade a mahn."

"Well," cried the girl with widening eyes, "and have you left him out there to perish in the snow?"

"Well, yez see, ma'am," said Tom, "it's the Frisco Sharp, jist."

"The Frisco Sharp?"

"No other, faith. It's only the day before ye come among us wid yer bright smiles, d'ye moind, that the b'ys run the blaggard out of camp."

"But I do not understand you!" cried Lillian, more and more bewildered. Then, turning to Judge Wiggins with clasped hands and tremulous lips:

"Oh, sir! what is the meaning of this? You can not wantonly leave a fellow-creature to die within reach of your hand—before your very eyes!"

The judge, who had not been of the rescuing party, but had made no effort to oppose that cruel abandonment, now felt ashamed of his inactivity.

"Boys," he said, in some confusion, "perhaps you'd better bring him in."

"Perhaps!" repeated the girl, her cheeks, but now as pale as a lily, glowing with sudden indignation. "Is it a debatable question? If you would not be guilty of deliberate murder, I charge you to go to his relief, and at once!"

"Whar's the use o' h'istin' him out o' whar he ain't doin' nothin' to nobody, an' puttin' ourselves to the trouble o' stringin' of him up the minute we git him into camp?" argued big Mose Finley, with more logic than humanity. "Bet a hoss, I don't eat my own words! We told him to git, an' he's got to stay git; or the minute he crosses the jail limits he's got swing!"

Lillian gazed from one to the other, unable to comprehend this vindictive malice.

"Ye see, Miss Lillian," explained Moxy, "this hyar gent is a card sharp, an' a doggoned lucky one, to draw it mild. But the boys didn't take much stock in the luck, but set it down to slight. So they fired him out, with a warnin' that ef he was ketched round hyar agin', he'd stretch hemp. Now leave him out yonder, an' he'll pass in his checks easy; an' nobody'll have to dirty their hands with the job. But fetch him in hyar, an' he'll swing, as sure as shootin'!"

"Oh, monstrous!" cried the girl. "Cannot you see that the man has not returned voluntarily? He is driven to your door to escape certain death in this awful tempest. Give him a chance for his life, and no doubt when the storm is past he will gladly go away and trouble you no more."

Whatever she might have said further, a new element entered the situation in the appearance of the Gentleman from Pike, accompanied by faithful Judd Baker.

"Nonsense, Judd," he was saying. "Do you take me for a baby? I'm worth half a dozen dead men, yet!"

And indeed, though yet pale, he had convalesced beyond the most sanguine hopes of those whose love for him made them jealous of every moment of suffering.

"Will! Will!—what imprudence!" cried Lillian, springing toward him.

"Only a little surprise, *petite*," he smiled, fondly. "See! I have only been playing off to prolong the pleasure of having so sweet a nurse."

And he walked across the room and back with a firm tread.

"But don't waste any more time on so unworthy an object as I. Where's the poor devil that Judd tells me the boys went to rescue?"

"Oh, Will!" cried the girl, "they have abandoned him!"

Then followed an explanation in which words of burning indignation mingled with tearful pity.

William Carleton was as much shocked as was his ward.

"Men, this can't be!" he exclaimed; but sullen looks assured him that it was indeed true.

"Can you be men?" he cried, his pale cheeks suddenly glowing, and his eyes flashing.

Then with a sudden resolve:

"Judd, I can rely on you. We can teach them a lesson in humanity!"

"Fardner, I'm with you, *every time*!" cried honest Judd Baker.

"Gentlemen"—turning again to the crowd—"I appeal to such of you as have a spark of manhood left to give this dying fellow-man a chance among us until he can go away in safety."

"Oh, forego your resentment!" seconded Lil-

ian, appealing to them with clasped hands and tearful, pleading eyes.

"Be the powers o' mud!" cried Tom O'Connor, with a sudden burst of enthusiasm. "Niver be it said of an O'Connor that he withstod the entreaties of innocence an' beauty! Command me? Divil fly away wid me, sowl an' body, but I'll folly yez to the ends o' the earth! Whist, b'ys! Will the loikes av yez stand out ag'in' a woman? Troth! they're not so plenty in this country that they're not to have their way."

But even gallantry was a vain appeal to the men of Hard Luck. Their unshaken hatred showed in their sullen, dogged frowns.

The clear, stern eye, the decisive ring in the voice of the Gentleman from Pike, his prompt, assured action, had their effect. The men stood inactive, waiting for their leader. He—big Mose Finley—only glowered, as yet.

A moment Carleton's eye ran over the sullen group. Then, disdaining further appeal, he turned on his heel and left the saloon.

Out over the snow he stalked, followed by Judd Baker, Tom O'Connor and the half-dozen who had shared his escape from the savages, until they came to that still form on which the pure white flakes of snow were falling one by one.

The Gentleman from Pike and Judd Baker bent over and took hold of the unconscious man at the same time turning his face to view. Then the former uttered a sharp, gasping cry.

"STAY!"

And with his arm, into which the strength of a giant seemed suddenly infused, he swept Judd Baker aside, and himself shrunk back.

The pallor of death was on his passion-distorted face, the glare of a fury in his eyes, as for a moment he stood with clenched hands and set teeth, panting and muttering:—

"My God!"

Judd Baker and the others regarded him with mouth agape.

"What in Cain, cap'n—?" began Judd.

But the man so terribly moved made a superhuman effort at self-mastery, brushing his hand across his brow on which great beads of icy sweat had started.

"Take him up and bring him to the house," he said, in a voice so hoarse that it was unrecognizable.

Immediately he turned back over the path they had come, walking as if that terrible throes of emotion had exhausted him.

Wondering, the men lifted their burden and followed him, not hearing his muttered words:—

"He is helpless. I would not crush a worm that appealed to me like that. And they shall not harm him. We will all take the same lesson in humanity. But afterwards!—when he is himself again!"

He did not conclude. His frame quivered with the restraint he put upon himself.

Once in the saloon, he turned his back when the Frisco sharp began to show signs of returning animation under the ministrations of Judd Baker.

A "stiff horn" set the gambler on his legs again, though he looked emaciated and cadaverous enough, as he huddled near the fire, drawing closer about him an Indian blanket ill in keeping with the rest of his dainty attire.

"Gentlemen," he said, looking round upon his frowning auditors with his wonted nonchalance, "since my departure from your hospitable camp, my path has not been strewn with roses. I first fell into an Indian ambushade. Then came the storm, which caught the savages themselves in a pretty trap. At the end of two days I think they were debating the question of roasting me for food, when, with my flask of brandy, drugged with laudanum which I am in the habit of keeping to pacify a jumping tooth, I managed to put my two guards to sleep, and so effected my escape. Since then, I have spent most of my time creeping on hands and knees through the snow, with this wretched blanket my only protection from the cold. I thought that my pitiable condition might serve as an excuse for intruding my presence again upon Hard Luck Camp."

"Waal," said big Mose Finley, "you knowed what you'd find hyar. Boys, I reckon this is as good a time as any!"

And he uncoiled a rope from his waist.

"Stop!" cried the Gentleman from Pike, and sprung between the would-be hangman and his intended victim.

CHAPTER XI.

THE NEW DANGER.

WITH a woman's quick sympathy, Lillian Amberleigh had hastened forward to meet the rescuing party, as they returned bearing the body of the unconscious outcast.

But her guardian had clutched her wrist, restraining her rudely.

"Do not touch him!" he had said, in a harsh, rasping voice that she had never heard before.

"Will?" she had protested and questioned, gazing at him in wonder.

"Obey without question!" he had commanded, frowning at her!—her whom he had never before touched or addressed save in tenderness.

And mute, abashed, the girl had shrunk away, and followed him into the house, as he strode

past her, her lips quivering, her eyes dim with tears, her gentle heart swelling with the first wound he had ever inflicted.

She saw him walk to the window and stand with folded arms, gazing out into the falling snow, paying no further heed to the man whom he had just now championed, nor to the wondering gaze of the miners who were not a little puzzled by this sudden change of feeling.

Wonder checked the falling tears of the girl, as she saw the strong frame of the man who she now knew had not wantonly wounded her shaken by a terrible battle of repressed emotion—so fierce that, as he struggled with clenched hands and set teeth, face pale and rigid, and eyes whose slumbrous fire even his strong will could not quench all at once, great beads of icy sweat cozed from his forehead.

What did it all mean? Was this man not a stranger? Was he connected with some terrible wrong or suffering whose lengthened shadow reaching out from the dead past had clouded her guardian's life ever since Lillian's recollection? Had fate brought these two together, that this good might be returned for evil—the wronger to be succored by the wronged?

Silently the girl drew to the side of the man and rested her cheek against his arm in wordless sympathy.

Then came big Mose Finley's menace and the man so strangely moved sprung once more to the rescue of one whom he had, perhaps, better cause to hate.

The Gentleman from Pike drew no weapon, as he faced that frowning mob; but there was that in his eye which told that he would protect with his life the shivering wretch whom he had saved from the storm.

The bad element of Hard Luck was bent on having the life of the Frisco sharp. The less brutal portion of the little community, under the leadership of Judge Wiggins, remained inactive, when they might with a word have turned the scale in favor of humanity.

It is doubtful what might have been the issue had not Lillian Amberleigh sprung forward and clasped Judge Wiggins's arm, crying:—

"Oh, sir! you are a man! you cannot stand coldly by and permit this monstrous iniquity! Give him but a shelter among us until the storm is past. Surely you can spare one of your cabins, if you are unwilling to let him stay here in the hotel."

"There's my shanty. Faith, there's no roof in' on it; but he can dig it out an' make shift to abide thur," suggested Tom O'Connor.

"That is all we ask," said the Gentleman from Pike, who perceived the wisdom of temporizing.

"Let up, boys," said Judge Wiggins, not very graciously. "The offer's fair enough. Ef he keeps to himself, I reckon we kin stand it for the few days this blockade is likely to last."

"Gents, air we goin' fur to be backed down in this hyar fashion?" cried big Mose Finley, not to be cheated out of his revenge without a last struggle.

"I think you are," said the Gentleman from Pike coolly, answering for the "boys," who he saw were falling away from their bloodthirsty leader. "If you are not satisfied, you and I can step just outside the door, and settle it between us."

There was a determined light in his clear gray eye which cowed the bully.

It took one moment, eye to eye, for big Mose Finley to recognize his master. Then, with a murderous scowl of hatred and a muttered oath, he turned.

"All right, gents. Ef the hull crowd takes water, remember it wa'n't none o' my funeral. Hard Luck is a blasted mean place for a white man to live in. It hain't no pay-dirt, an' no sand!"

Taking no heed of Mr. Finley's expressions of disgust, the Gentleman from Pike said, briskly:

"Come! The sooner we set to work, the sooner we'll have this gentleman under ungrudged shelter. Who joins the shovel brigade?"

"Hurrah, boys! No shirking!" cried Judd Baker; and his brisk example was followed by all that little band that had followed Carleton from the death-trap; but of the original denizens of Hard Luck only Tom O'Connor responded.

From the moment that the Gentleman from Pike stepped forward so that the Frisco Sharp could distinguish him from the crowd, the latter stared at him in stupefied bewilderment.

The other paid no heed, but went out with the shovelers, seemingly unconscious of weakness from his recent wound.

They who had volunteered were few, but worked with a right good will; and soon a path was dug to Tom O'Connor's shanty, the walls of which had been erected, though it was roofless, and therefore full of snow.

While it was being closed with a temporary roof, the shovelers cleared out the snow, disclosing a hole—"wha-ur," said Tom O'Connor, ruefully, "I've pegged an' pegged, wid divil a cint comin' out beyant me praties an' potheen! So says I to the b'ys—'Don't waste yer toime roofin' that shanty.' Faith, I'll not drop precious sweat in that hole anny more."

And in this cheerless domicile was housed the dainty Jules St. Auburn!

As he crouched shivering near the fire and watched Lillian Amberleigh flit about, making the desolate room a little homelike in her deft, woman's way, his lip quivered, and into his cold, cynical eyes came a look of softened tenderness.

When she left him for the night, he rose, walked feebly with her to the door, and, bending over her hand, touched it with his lips, and let fall upon it a tear. He had no words for his gratitude.

Entering the room at that moment, the Gentleman from Pike saw the act.

With a muffled, inarticulate cry, like the snarl of an enraged animal, he leaped forward and snatched Lillian's hand away.

Then these two men, both weak and pale with suffering, faced each other in a voiceless battle of the eye, while the girl shrunk abashed, and gazed from one to the other, unable to understand this antagonism too deep for words.

William Carleton, ever so cool, now choked with passion, while his eyes blazed with a hate that would have annihilated.

Jules St. Auburn betrayed neither fear nor anger. His eyes, his attitude, seemed to say:

"Strike!—you have the power and the cause!"

But Carleton turned without a word, and drew the bewildered Lillian away.

The next morning the Frisco Sharp was found raving in delirium. Then Hard Luck was seized with a panic which turned men, not overly humane at best, into veritable demons.

"It's all along of that Injun blanket," said big Mose Finley. "Gents, we're snowed in hyar, an' that cuss has brought small-pox into camp!"

At that announcement the miners turned pale with dread.

"Thar's no runnin' away from it," pursued Mose. "We've got to grin an' b'ar it now. But you know an' I know that it'll be fool's luck, of one in ten of us gits out o' this hole alive. Ef I'd had my way, that galoot 'ud 'a' been out yonder, covered up by the snow, a-doin' no hurt to nobody; but thanks to the humanity of some an' the doggone fool crawfishin' of others, I was put down. An' now, gents, that you've got more'n you bargained for, what air ye goin' to do about it?"

He was answered only by dark frowns. Already the sovereigns of Hard Luck regretted what they now considered their weakness of the day previous.

"Don't be too sure that it is a case of small-pox," said the Gentleman from Pike, making an effort to stem the tide of popular discontent. "I will go and examine the sick man; and if it proves so bad as you fear, I will undertake the care of him without calling upon any one else to expose himself to contagion."

"That's all very fine fur talk," growled big Mose Finley; "but I reckon small-pox can't be barred out so easy. We was doggoned fools fur lettin' it into camp, in the first place."

"That's so!" came a muttered assent.

"Boss, you're shoutin'!"

"We'd oughter strung him up before we let him leave this burg!"

There was no use arguing with such men. The Gentleman from Pike turned to leave the room, to find Lillian Amberleigh at his side, ready to accompany him.

"Lilly!" he exclaimed.

"I will go with you," she said, quietly.

"No, no, my dear. If there is danger, you must not expose yourself."

Then the face of the girl glowed with a grandly beautiful devotion, and her eyes took on a humid eloquence.

"Do you think that I would shrink from a peril into which you walk?" she asked, gazing upon him with a look that thrilled him strangely. "Besides, God has me in his keeping. In performing my duty to humanity, I shall surely not go counter to His will."

"Did the case imperatively demand your presence, I would not oppose your going," replied her guardian. "But here all that is necessary can be done without exposing you. Stay here!"

He spoke decidedly. Though she gazed after him anxiously, she never dreamed of opposing his expressed will.

But she was recalled to her surroundings by a discussion which was begun the moment the assembly was relieved of Carleton's presence.

"Look a-hyar, gents," cried big Mose Finley, "is this hyar thing to be let to run? What air ye goin' to do about it?"

"What kin we do about it?" asked Moxy. "We're in the box, an' I reckon thar we've got to stay."

"Not much!"

"Show us the way out—that's all!"

"Burn the shebang over his head!"

All started at this fiendish proposition.

Lillian Amberleigh uttered a cry of horror, and gazed at the brute as if fascinated.

He favored her with a scowl; then turned again to his male auditors.

"Remember, you went back on me yesterday," he said; "an' this hyar's what you git fer your humanity!—a mighty smart chance to have this camp rubbed out so clean that thar

won't be a grease-spot left to tell whar it stood. Look a-hyar, gents—you know what small pox is in this country. A year ago it broke out in Pittman's Bar, while the Injuns was blockadin' the place. Thar's twenty unburied skeletons up thar to-day—what the wolves an' sich has left of 'em! Two men tried to run the blockade, an' the Injuns ketched 'em. Out of a hundred an' fifty Injuns, seventeen got away! I reckon we'd better burn yonder shanty—don't you?"

And the girl who had listened to this horrible story with bated breath, saw its dread effect stamped on the gloomy faces of those men in whose hearts fear now supplemented hatred, and slipping from the room sped with flying feet to warn the gentleman from Pike.

And after her went the furious mob.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ASSAULT.

"LILLIE, in Heaven's name!" exclaimed her guardian, as the girl burst into his presence.

"Oh, Will! Will!" was the distracted reply, "they are coming to burn the cabin!"

"Coming to what?"

"To burn the house over this poor gentleman's head! Oh! what shall we do to prevent such monstrous wickedness and cruelty?"

"Do!" repeated the man, his eyes blazing fire as his face grew white and rigid. "We will try the force of leaden logic!"

With a firm stride he crossed the room to the one window beside the door.

The crowd of miners were just pouring out of the No-tie under the leadership of big Mose Finley, who waved a blazing and black-smoking pine-knot.

Judge Wiggins, reluctant to take a prominent part in this demonstration, yet in no wise disposed to impede it, lagged in the rear.

Judd Baker and Tom O'Connor were excitedly arguing with the rioters. The remaining half-dozen who had shared Carleton's peril and escape remained neutral, evidently afraid of the plague, and disposed to yield one man's life, however unjustly or cruelly, as the price of their own safety.

"Hold on, boys!" shouted Judd Baker. "You don't know the Gentleman from Pike as I do. If you push this thing, it'll be war to the knife. He'll never yield up the man he's undertaken to defend as long as he's got a leg to stand on. And remember, he's a dead shot!"

"That's a game we kin all play at," replied Mose Finley. "Shall we let a man that's already elected to swing breed small-pox in the camp that'll leave us all to rot unburied? What's the word, boys?"

"Not No!"

"Devil a bit!"

"Smoke out the hospital rat!"

"Ef this hyar Gent from Pike chooses to back him, he'll have to take what he gits," growled big Mose Finley. "We hain't lettin' no stranger come in hyar an' run this camp—eh, fellows?"

"Right fur you, boss!"

"Shoot ary galoot that interferes!"

"Then thar'll be two of us!" shouted Judd Baker, springing forward and placing his back against the cabin door, while he presented a frowning pistol in ei her hand.

"Arrah, ye divils! here's another! And remember, thar's a lady in this cabin!" cried honest Tom O'Connor, ranging himself beside Judd. "A thrue son of Erin is always found on the soide av beauty and humanity!"

The door of the cabin opened at their backs, and the Gentleman from Pike stepped forth and drew his two coadjutors behind him into the doorway.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, facing the mob with a look that abashed most of them.

"It means that we're a-goin to burn this pest-hole and all that's in it!" cried big Mose Finley, blusteringly. "Stand from under, for we're a-comin'! We hain't no call to hurt you; but the Frisco Sharp is bound to go up in smoke!"

"Stop, gentlemen!" cried Carleton, still drawing no weapon, though Mose Finley menacingly waved his torch in one hand and his revolver in the other. "Since you are dead to all considerations of humanity, I present one which will appeal directly to your selfishness. I have undertaken to protect this man, and I shall defend him to the death! While I live the man who attempts to apply a torch to this building will be dropped in his tracks!"

"We'll see about that! Come on, boys!" yelled Mose Finley, and instantly blazed away at the champion who seemed all unprepared for so sudden an assault.

But the assailed leaped to one side, unhurt and the next instant Mose Finley went down in the snow, with a bullet in his leg.

"I did not aim at his life, as you all must see," cried the Gentleman from Pike; "but the next man dies!"

At this moment a scream issued from the cabin.

For an instant Carleton's heart stood still. He was paralyzed by the fear that Lillian had been struck by Mose Finley's bullet.

But he heard her cry:

"Oh, detain him! detain him! He will catch his death!"

He turned his head, and saw a strange and startling spectacle.

The Frisco Sharp had risen from his bed, and was rushing toward the door with the blankets trailing about him.

With extended arms and eyes blazing with insanity, he looked like some dread forerunner of disaster, as he shrieked wildly:

"Fly! Fly for your very lives! In God's name fly!"

It was almost a quotation of that dread warning which had rung down the Death Canyon ten years ago; but of those who had heard it, Lillian Amberleigh was too young to remember it, and William Carleton had not been impressed by his own words; so the coincidence had no significance for him now.

But, shocked by the unexpected fall of their leader, this strange spectacle thrilled the miners with a sort of superstitious terror; and they fled in a body, falling over one another in their blind panic.

The rout would have been ludicrous but for the tragic elements that entered into the scene.

Jules St. Auburn would have rushed forth into the snow in his delirium, but he was caught and restrained by Judd Baker and Tom O'Connor. Even their united strength might have been insufficient; but Carleton's eye calmed the distraught spirit, and the three got him back to bed.

Then the Gentleman from Pike strode forth without a moment's hesitation, passed the spot where big Mose Finley lay gnashing his teeth and groaning in pain and rage, and boldly entered into the very midst of his late assailants.

CHAPTER XIII.

PAID IN HIS OWN COIN.

IN rapid, eloquent words the Gentleman from Pike made his appeal; but nothing that he could say would overcome the miners' terror of the plague or move them to any show of self-sacrificing magnanimity. The utmost that he could accomplish was a truce in which he and his party were to be left to occupy the cabin with their patient unmolested. Food would be brought half-way and left for them to get, until the end of the snow blockade. After that they must shift for themselves.

"It's a poor preacher that don't stand by his own doctrine," said Judd Wiggins, sullenly. "As you're backin' humanity so strong that you're willin' to put us in a hole with the Frisco Sharp, of course you won't have no objections to stayin' with him yourself. Ef he's good enough fur us, he's good enough fur you!"

"Solid dukel!" rumbled Moxy.

"Ef you keep to yourselves," pursued the judge, "I reckon thar won't be no more trouble. But ye can't none o' you come among us, an' don't ye try it, ur thar'll be war, sure! One man kin back down a crowd when they ain't partic'larly sot; but no two-legged critter can't fetch small-pox into this crowd, now mind what I tell ye!"

There are limits to what even boldness and determination can accomplish; and the Gentleman from Pike knew that he could make no further head.

Without more ado he returned to the cabin; Mose Finley was borne to the No-tie by his friends; and night settled down over Hard Luck Camp.

Then followed days in which the men of the mining camp watched each other with brooding suspicion. The slightest appearance of illness caused the sufferer to be shunned by his fellows.

Big Mose Finley was the first to feel the cruel force of the precedent he himself had been foremost in establishing.

"Boys," said Moxy, gloomily, "thar's no two ways about it—Mose is elected! God only knows who'll come next; but I reckon we've got to take care of number one the best way we know how."

"What do you propose to do about it?" asked Judge Wiggins.

"Mose pitched the trump himself. I reckon he'll have to swallow his own gruel," replied Moxy.

"Git?" asked the judge.

"Git!"

"What d'ye say, boys?" pursued the judge.

The "boys" said not a word. Their gloomy faces answered for them.

"Who'll engineer the thing?" asked the judge, once more.

"I reckon your chief," said Moxy.

A rumble of assent indicated the sense of the assembly.

Judge Wiggins picked out four men, and together they went to big Mose Finley's room.

The wretched man raised on his elbow and glared at them. He seemed to know intuitively why they had come.

"Waal, what's the word?" he demanded.

"Mose, I reckon you've got to git!" said the judge.

"What fur?"

"You know what's the matter with ye."

"Small-pox?"

"Small-pox!"

"An' you propose to cart me to one o' the empty shanties?"

"That's the vote of the majority."

"Who's goin' to take care o' me?"

"I reckon that hain't provided fur."

"But when I'm out thar alone nobody'll come anigh."

"Most likely the boys 'll be afraid."

"Who'll bring me my grub?"

The judge was silent.

Big Mose Finley answered the question himself.

"Nobody!"

He brushed the matted hair from his brow. His bloodshot eyes grew wilder. Then they became piteous in their agonized appeal. There was a strange quaver of weakness and helplessness and fear in his voice, as he asked:

"An' is the boys goin' to kick me out, to die out thar in the cold, all alone by myself?"

"It's you or us. It'll be the doggone miracle if it ain't you and us!" said the judge, solemnly.

"An' you've come to pack me out—now?" cried the wretch, looking about him wildly, as if for help or escape.

"Yes!" was the low reply.

"Not much!" fairly yelled the stricken man; and from beneath his pillow he drew a revolver, and faced them with maniac defiance.

Moxy saw what was coming. He was a man who acted quickly in an emergency. With a bound he was upon the bed and had clutched the wrist of the other.

Then ensued a terrible struggle.

Big Mose Finley's revolver was self-cocking, and exploded the instant his wrist was gripped.

One of the "committee" uttered a sharp cry:—

"I'm plugged!"

And he staggered blindly out of the room.

Bang! went the pistol again; and the men engaged in that death-grapple rolled off the narrow bunk to the floor, making the house tremble beneath the fall of their heavy bodies.

Completely demoralized by the terror of the scene, the rest of the committee, including Judge Wiggins himself, rushed from the room, while others from below crowded up the stairs.

The maniac yells and oaths of big Mose Finley, and the cries for help of Moxy, who dared not let go the man he had grappled, all blended with the repeated discharge of the revolver, held the crowd dismayed, until Judge Wiggins recovered his presence of mind and shouted:—

"Boys, we can't leave Moxy to be murdered! Come on!"

And he bounded back into the room followed by others whose courage was equal to the risk.

For one moment after their entry pandemonium prevailed. Then came an ominous silence. Big Mose Finley had been knocked senseless!

Loud talk and the tramping of heavy boots followed. Then Judge Wiggins appeared in the doorway, ordering the men to clear the hall and stairs.

After him came four men, bearing a silent, motionless burden, wrapped from head to foot in blankets.

Moxy was one of the party, his clothes torn, his face covered with blood and smudged with powder, and his eyes blazing with dogged purpose.

Through the saloon and out in the snow they passed, to a deserted shanty. Presently they came forth—burdenless!

As they filed back into the saloon the crowd looked questioningly at them.

The men said not a word. Sullenly they sat down around the red-hot stove.

The gloom, the silence, in that crowded room was horrible. On every hand were lowering brows and covert glances of suspicion.

Behind his bar Sutler Bob stood, pale with fear, and glancing from one to another until he could endure it no longer.

"Look a-hyar, boys," almost pathetically, "this sort o' thing won't do! Step up and take somethin'!"

"Hold on, gents!" cried Judge Wiggins. "You know as well as I do that whisky an' small-pox would knock the devil himself out of his boots! We're goin' to have a mighty tight squeak o' this, the best we kin do. Ef you want to have one ur two left to bury the dead, take a fool's advice, an' let the benzine alone for a few days!"

The men shuddered. Not one stirred to accept their host's invitation.

"Gents," said Moxy, relating the incident afterward, "I reckon sich a thing never happened before anywhar on this hyar terrestrial ball! Down in the mouth? Waal!"

But there came a diversion from a man who chanced to look out of the window.

"Waal, I'm blowed! Jest look at these hyar blasted fools!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ANGEL OF HARD LUCK.

It had been William Carleton's first care to secure a separate shanty for his ward's accommodation, and during the first days Judd Baker and Tom O'Connor worked diligently to make it as comfortable as possible. As for Carleton, in the excitement he had overdone his strength,

and was again "an the brahd av his back," as O'Connor said.

So Lillie became nurse to both sick men, and by the time her guardian was up and about again, honest Judd Baker was down.

This was the trouble of the exiles when they beheld that blanketed form borne out of the No-tic, where the miners, abandoning their separate shanties, had unwisely huddled together, as if to seek security in numbers.

"Be the powers! that's the maning o' the shooting up at the saloon," said Tom O'Connor. "They've had a fight, an' wan o' the b'ys is laid out. Which, I wonder?"

"Oh! let us go and see," cried Lillie, shuddering. "Perhaps the poor fellow is not yet dead. They did not take long to ascertain. Oh! how cruel, how wicked they all are!"

The "committee" had abandoned the plague-stricken man without doing a single thing for his comfort, indeed not even stopping to withdraw the blanket from his face, but each man hurrying forth, as if fearful of being the last in the room.

So our friends found him; and when the Gentleman from Pike drew the blanket from the face, disclosing the ghastly blood-stained horror, even he shrank back.

"Swate St Pathrick!" cried Tom O'Connor. "But they've thrated that devil to his own saucer! Well! well! sure, it's a strange worruld, wha-ur ivery wan gits his due in the long run!"

The Gentleman from Pike soon discovered that the man was not dead, but only stunned; and a judicious application of brandy soon restored him to consciousness.

Struggling to his elbow, he glared around with blood-shot eyes, his horrid visage causing Lillian to shrink shuddering away.

"Who in the devil are you, an' what d'ye want?" he demanded, savagely.

"Your companions abandoned you, thinking you dead, no doubt; and we have come to care for you," said the Gentleman from Pike, curbing his sense of repulsion.

"Dead!" repeated Mose, with a laugh of horrible sarcasm. "Not they! The sweet angels set me adrift because I've got the small-pox! Devilish big hurry, too. They didn't stop to build a fire, nor nothin'. You hain't got the plague yit, I see. Better 'light out an' let me alone. I'm goin' to be a bad customer. I feel it in my bones."

All this was interlarded with the most shocking oaths.

"We are not so brutal as the men who abandoned you," said the Gentleman from Pike.

"We will give you the best care we can."

"And you're the galoot that I helped kick out o' the No-tic, along with the Frisco Sharp?" said Mose, glaring at him. "I don't want nothin' o' you! Go to the devil, and let me alone!"

"Ye onmannerly blaggard!" cried Tom O'Connor, in hot indignation. "It 'ud serve yez right to take yez at yer word! Come away, Musther Carleton. Faith, it's not fur a gentleman loike yerself to dirty yer hands on the likes o' him!"

Big Mose Finley only scowled black malignity, and dropped back on his bed with his face to the wall.

"Build a fire," said the Gentleman from Pike, quietly, to the Irishman, and without more ado set about, seconded by Lillian, to make the sick man as comfortable as possible under the circumstances.

This was the beginning; and ere many days Hard Luck Camp was a lazar-house, in which all distinctions were lost. Lillian Amberleigh went and came, to the No-tic Saloon as well as to the shanties in which, in the beginning, the panic-stricken miners had abandoned their comrades. And to the bedside of many a pain-racked wretch her gentle woman's ways came fraught with blessings, until by universal consent they called her the Angel of Hard Luck.

Then came the dark day when faithful Judd Baker lay as weak as an infant, and said in a hoarse whisper:—

"I don't regret standin' up for him, cap'n, though it's brought me my death. It was the squar' thing to do, an' I'd do it ag'in to morrer. Then whelps wa'n't human to drop him thar in the snow, ef he was a bad 'un. God bless ye fer your care o' a tough old cuss like me—an' you Miss Lillie."

"Oh, Judd!" cried Lillian, weeping by the bedside, "could we do less!—and you stood by us so nobly through the Indian attack!"

The honest mountainman smiled faintly.

"I was bound to pull you through, ef it took a leg," he said. "You didn't git a scratch then, an' you hain't got touched yit by the plague. I reckon it's 'cause you're so good an' so handsome. The Lord don't want to sp'ile a thing He's made so beautiful."

And seeming to take great satisfaction in this thought, he "passed out."

This was a true house of mourning, though around lay horrors without name—dead men with none to bury them, and perhaps in the same room, wretches in the delirium of fever cursing the man who had brought this calamity upon them.

Even then those who had not yet been stricken down, though none knew whose turn would

come next, would have wreaked dire vengeance on the Frisco Sharp, but that the man whose hatred was equalled only by his magnanimity stood between him and his enemies as unmoved as a rock.

And he who had brought the dread scourge rose from his bed, pale and emaciated, but without a scar on that face which now took on a sort of feminine beauty. He would have helped care for the sick; but the Gentleman from Pike not looking at him, but with his eyes on the floor, his face pale and his voice constrained with emotions that he struggled to suppress, said:—

"As long as they do not see you I can control them; but at the sight of you recovered when so many of their comrades lie dead and unburied, they would burst all bounds. Remain where you are."

Without a word Jules St. Auburn complied.

At last there came a season when the heavens poured down warm rains, the snows were dissipated, and the mountain gorges resounded with the rush of mighty floods. Then the glad sun burst forth, and nature was at peace.

One night the Gentleman from Pike stood before the man whom he had saved from the violence of his fellow-men and the ravages of disease, and, as before, not looking at him, said:—

"The time has come for you to make your escape. The miners have sworn that you shall never leave this place alive; and they may fall upon you at any moment, if you prolong your stay. Follow me."

Still never looking at the man, he turned and left the cabin.

Without a word the Frisco Sharp rose and followed him.

Her woman's instinct told Lillian that she could not take leave of a man whom her guardian treated in this way. She did not approach him, but sat with her eyes on the floor, wondering what terrible wrong he had done to the man she loved.

The Frisco Sharp perceived and respected her feelings.

Out into the darkness he followed his guide, until they came to a horse, saddled and bridled, and with his hoofs muffled in blankets.

William Carleton said nothing, but stepped aside out of the path.

Jules St. Auburn passed him, unhitched the horse, and mounted in silence.

A moment he hesitated. He looked at his preserver, and seemed about to speak at last. Were they words of gratitude that trembled on his lips?

The eyes of the Gentleman from Pike were on the ground. He stood like a rock—waiting.

Without a word, the Frisco Sharp rode away in the gloom!

Then Carleton's eyes rose, and looked where the night had swallowed up this man between whom and himself fell so black a shadow of mystery. And so he stood—silent, motionless.

A light footfall drew near. A graceful form crept close to his side. Warm hands clasped his and raised it to loving lips, and a tear of voiceless sympathy fell upon its back.

Then he put his arm about her neck, drew her head upon his breast and slowly, gently stroked her hair. And the iron sternness of his face softened, and one by one stranger tears slipped down his cheeks.

So they two stood alone in the darkness!

CHAPTER XV.

A STRANGE LADY.

"FINE! Ain't she? Um! A choice article, ur I'm a liar! An' thar's Moxy—lucky dog!—a buzzin' of her all alone by herself! An' smiles! Gee-whillikins!—I should say so! An' a hull band o' music—bass drum throwed in!—ain't shucks beside her voice! An' then them eyes! Oh! rub me down with a brickbat! When she looks at me an' says:—

"Mr. Robert—"

"Haw! haw! haw! Mr. Robert! Waal, I swar! Me!—Hunky Bob! That does me proud! When she says to me:—

"Mr. Robert, air we nearly to Angel's Find? What a strange name," says she; 'but this is a strange country, and strange people inhabit it. Air we nearly to Angel's Find?' says she."

"An', Lord! I dreamed o' peaches an' cream, an' canary birds, an' sich!"

"Yes'm," says I, as chipper as a tomtit.

"It's jist across the divide, ma'am."

"Thank'ee, sir," says she; an' them eyes fatched streaked feelin's 'way up from my toe-nails to the roots o' my ha'r! An' now thar's Moxy—Oh, thunder! Ge-up!"

And Hunky Bob, in great disgust at the unequal awards of fate, flitted his long whiplash at the off-leader with a crack like the report of a pistol.

Then, as the spirited mare and her mate took to prancing and tossing their heads, he soothed them into a quiet trot again, saying in a purring tone:—

"Whoa, Dolly! Steady, old gal! Gently, my beauties! So! So!"

Meanwhile, the subject of his meditations was inside the coach—a dainty little creature, considerably less than the medium size of wo-

men, with great, piercing black eyes, and soft, silken hair, as jetty as a raven's wing, and as fine and lustrous as floss. She sat cuddled up in the corner, with a lap-robe over her knees and a soft, fleecy affair about her neck, though it was midsummer, giving one the impression, not so much that she was cold, as that she was delicate and fragile—a thing that the winds must not blow upon too rudely.

So exquisitely beautiful, so formed for protection, she was just the sort of woman to captivate great strong men and bend them to her voracious whim, ruling them with a rod of iron without their realizing the fact.

To those rude fellows of the mountains she was a revelation, a dream of enchantment, a creature from some other sphere.

Moxy started and blushed every time she spoke to him, and could hardly find words with which to frame his stammering replies.

"Waal, ye see, ma'am," he said, in reply to her question, "thar's a kind of a yarn back of it. The place was called Hard Luck, at first; an' doggoned hard luck the boys had thar, too. It was changed to Angel's Find all along of Miss Lillie."

"Miss Lillie? A mountain belle?"

"A which, ma'am?—beggin' yer pardon?"

"The prettiest woman in the camp, I presume."

"The only woman, ma'am. An' purty! Waal, I reckon she's jist the prettiest leetle gal you ever see—present company excepted, ma'am!"

"Oh, of course"—laughingly. "But who is she? Miss Lillie what?"

"Waal, now, I allow you git me, ma'am. Miss Lillie is about as fur as I ever got in that deal."

"How strange. Has she no surname?"

"Oh, I reckon she has some's—in the States, perhaps."

"In the States! Do people leave their surnames behind them when they come to this delightfully original country?"

"Waal, mostly, I reckon."

"I'll! Well, go on."

"Ye see, ma'am, she lives along o' the Gentleman from Pike."

"A representative in your State legislature, I infer."

"No, ma'am; beggin' your pardon, you don't drop to me jist right. The Gentleman from Pike is a sharp from Pike's Peak, ye understand—the solid man an' head referee of Angel's Find. Runs the only quartz crusher in the place."

"And this Mrs. Lillie, I presume you mean. His wife?"

"Waal, no, ma'am, not his wife."

"His sister, then?"

"N—n—o! not exactly."

"Oh!" said the lady.

"Oh, it's all right!" cried Moxy, hastily. "You'd only orter see her onc'e, an' then you'd make no mistake."

"Well, go on with your story," said the lady, as if not disposed to argue the point.

Then followed the story of the Frisco Sharp and the darkest days of Hard Luck Camp, Moxy concluding:

"Just about this time big Mose Finley got on his legs ag'in'. But he wa'n't noways handsome, you kin bet! An' the way he hated the Frisco Sharp! I reckon he'd 'a' bolted him, taller an' hide, ef he'd dropped onto him! So he stirred the boys up—which the same they didn't need much stirrin'!—an' we went for the shanty whar Frisco had harbored. But thar wa'n't nobody to home by Tom O'Connor. He bluffed us fer a spell, an' while we was a-sparin' with him at chin-music, up comes the Gentleman from Pike an' Miss Lillie."

"What's all this row? says he."

"And Mose reeled it off fur him in short meter. Fur Mose was sassy, no matter how many times you downed him."

"We've come fur the Frisco Sharp," says he; 'an' this time we're bound to fetch him, ur bu'st the traces!"

"The Frisco Sharp is whar you won't see him ag'in' in a hurry," says the Gentleman from Pike, passin' us, and goin' into the shanty, leavin' the door open after him."

"An' he didn't tell no lie. Frisco had lit out; an' we've never sot eyes on him from that day to this. Of course the Gent had rung in a cold deal on us; but even Mose wa'n't ready to buck ag'in' him; so the matter dropped."

"After that, the fust thing we knew, Miss Lillie dropped on a big find half a mile futher up the pocket; an' the boys has been in clover ever since. So that's how we come to call it Angel's Find."

Just at this instant a clear, ringing voice sounded down the mountain gorge.

"Halt! Throw up your hands!"

"By thunder!" cried Moxy, in amaze. "Blow me ef that don't sound like road-agent business! Never heard of that lay on this road afore."

And as the coach came to a standstill, he thrust his head out of the door.

Sure enough, there in the road sat a man on horseback, his face disguised by a black mask, and a rifle held menacingly at the shoulder.

"Waal, I swar!" exclaimed Moxy, upon as-

surging himself that the coach had indeed been halted by a knight of the road. "This hyar begins to sound like old Californy times. The country's lookin' up! We didn't need nothin' but a sample o' these gents to make this hyar section an' airbly paradise. But we're bound to have all the modern improvements! Oh, we're comin' along, bet yer boots!"

And he rubbed his hands and chuckled in evident enjoyment.

The lady passenger looked surprised.

"And it's a matter for self-gratulation that we are to be robbed?" she asked.

"Why, ma'am, yo see," explained Moxy, "if we was a pack o' beggars with nary an ounce in our pockets, it wouldn't pay nobody to take to the road. But the old song—'halt! throw up yer hands!'—is a sign o' prosperity! We ought to be thankful that we're *with* robbin'!"

"But hyar's the gent to speak fur himself."

And, indeed, Moxy's bit of Western philosophy was cut short by the appearance of the road-agent at the side of the coach.

Some feminine whim prompted the lady to drop her veil over her face, so that when the robber looked into the coach he saw only a little woman quite as effectually masked as himself.

What the lady saw was a man of slender, elegant build, with small hands and feet, and soft, wavy hair, dressed with a taste that would not have shamed Broadway, and mounted upon a horse of perfect symmetry and costly housings.

When he lifted his hat the gesture was full of grace, and when he spoke his voice was low and melodious and his articulation polished.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I did not anticipate the presence of a lady. Allow me to reassure you, if I have awakened apprehensions by my unceremonious intrusion. But I beg you to believe that I yield to none in my reverence for the sex that claims all our chivalry. And far from giving you just cause for alarm, I hope—"

But here the smooth flow of his apology was cut short by Moxy, who shouted:

"Waal, blow me ef it ain't the Frisco Sharp that I've been tellin' ye bout! Speak o' the devil, an' ye'll see his horns!"

As for the lady, she had started forward in her seat, with a low ejaculation, and then sunk back, in seeming agitation.

Perhaps her emotion was a woman's natural timidity; perhaps it was something else.

The words that sprung to her lips were:

"St. Auburn!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GALLANT ROAD-AGENT.

"BUT, boss," pursued Moxy, "how in Cain did you manage to give us the slip? You're wanted up in Angel's Find. The boys has got jist the neatest-fittin' necktie you ever see, savin' it up fur ye. Thar's some new faces up thar; but thar's enough o' the old gang to give ye a royal boom, ef so be you chip in."

"My Christian friend," said the road-agent, in cool, measured tones, "it's not always wise to tell all one may know. A wagging tongue often digs a pit which discreet silence might have bridged over. I'll trouble you to alight from the coach. Though the exigencies of an untoward fate compel me to levy a slight loan on you, it were unseemly that such a transaction should come under the eye of a lady."

"Lal how tender you are of women critters!" said Moxy. "Now, ef you'd only let me off along o' my mother or sister. I reckon I cught to have one or t'other some's in this hyar great an' glorious universe. Consider her feelin's!"

Although he indulged in his joke, Moxy obeyed promptly. Meanwhile, beneath his careless exterior lurked a lynx-like vigilance, and the slightest negligence on the part of the Frisco Sharp, might have cost him his life; for Moxy was as loth to part with his gold-dust as the average man, if it could be helped.

But the road-agent was not to be caught napping. Nonchalant as he was, he never lost points in a game through carelessness.

"March to the head of the horses," he commanded.

Moxy complied.

There, out of sight and hearing of the lady, he pursued:

"Hand your arms up to me, and if you think you see a chance for a snapshot at me during the operation, you are welcome to try your luck."

"Thank'ee; I ain't takin' no chances," said Moxy, as he passed pistol and bowie knife over to his captor.

"Now—with your leave!—for such a contribution to my depleted finances as your generosity may dictate," said the road-agent politely.

"Ya-as!" laughed Moxy. "It does me proud to drop my pile into the pot, so that a gent o' your delicate raisin' needn't soil his lily-white hands with work. But if I ever git abolt o' one end of a rope while you're presidin' at the other, I hope you'll be as perlit as I am now, an' not squeal ef I put in my best licks on the home tug."

"I never quarrel with fate," said the Frisco Sharp, with a gambler's sense of predestination. "Oblige me by remaining where you are for a moment."

And he rode back to the side of the coach.

In this scene there had been a bit of by-play which had escaped Moxy's perception. At the sound of the road-agent's voice the strange lady had started violently, with a suppressed ejaculation which Moxy, in the surprise of recognizing the Frisco Sharp, did not notice.

Only the delicate ear of the outlaw caught the name:

"St. Auburn!"

Whatever there was in it, it affected him powerfully, an agitation which Moxy's address served in a measure to cover, until he had regained self-mastery.

Left alone, the lady lay back in her seat trembling violently. But when the road-agent returned she sat proudly erect, evidently all the forces of her nature in arms.

"Again I beg your pardon, madam," he said, suavely, "for this unseemly interruption of your journey. But may I not know to whom I owe apology for which I despair of finding the grace?"

"You can have no interest in a stranger," said the lady, coldly. "And since you are pleased to treat me so courteously, the novelty of the adventure will more than compensate for any momentary embarrassment. So, no apology is necessary."

"The graciousness, madam, with which you seek to quiet my self-reproach only makes me feel my culpability the more keenly. To have caused so fair a lady a moment's distress is not easily atoned. And since in this wild country fortune may at any moment favor me with an opportunity to do you a service, you cannot have the heart, surely, to deny me the knowledge to whom my hopes may look forward to making this slight recompense."

"Sir, you are persistent."

"Madam, it is the measure of my contrition"—with a low bow.

"You seem to forget that you have not yet revealed yourself."

"My only excuse is that I would hide my face, for very shame, from one against whom I have trespassed beyond forgiveness. But, since your word is my law, behold one who places his pride beneath your feet."

And with movements of his own peculiar grace the Frisco Sharp deftly removed his mask.

Beautiful of feature as symmetrical in form, his humility of look and attitude contrasting with the pride of the noble animal he bestrode, Jules St. Auburn sat before the veiled lady, a culprit whose penitence might well move the hardest of male hearts, but beneath the long lashes that drooped over his languid brown eyes glowed a burning curiosity.

This man was like a volcano draped in peaceful verdure.

As for the lady, the sight of his face must have called up memories that moved her as profoundly as had those evoked by the sound of his voice; for she gripped her hand spasmodically in the folds of her dress, her bosom fluttered, and her veil was disturbed by agitated breathing.

For a moment a dead silence fell between them, the Frisco Sharp waiting patiently.

That silence was broken by the sudden clang of iron-bound hoofs which, inaudible in the sand which formed a portion of the road, rung out with startling clearness when they struck a spot of bare rock.

The Frisco Sharp looked up and discovered a party of some half-dozen horsemen coming into sight round a bend at no great distance.

Without any show of trepidation in look or voice, he said:

"Pardon me, madam, if the necessity of abruptly terminating our interview prompts me to urge you to the fulfillment, without further delay, of your implied engagement."

"I recognize no such implication, sir," said the lady, laughingly. "Ride on, and save yourself from the danger which threatens you."

"Why do you bid me thus?" said the man, making no effort to escape, but leaning forward in his saddle, and tending upon the woman a look of hungry longing. "What interest have you in my safety?"

"What, indeed?" replied the lady, coldly. "Let us suppose a woman's natural reluctance to witness bloodshed."

Still he lingered, though the riders were closing in upon him rapidly, and to be taken by them meant death.

If he waited to see if the imminence of his peril would make the lady betray some token of nervousness, he waited in vain. She sat perfectly still, seemingly unmoved.

What manner of woman was she—this dainty creature whom one would have expected to shrink from the crushing of an insect?

A tall, imperious woman might be cruel; but she—she was scarcely more than a child in stature, and her delicate organism seemed formed only for love and softness.

"I hope to see you again under more auspicious circumstances," said the Frisco Sharp, with perhaps a suspicion of tender regret in his voice. Then, with a lingering look and something like a sigh, he turned his horse and sped away.

A rallying cry from Moxy, and the approach

ing horsemen caught the meaning of the scene, and, yelling, dashed in hot pursuit.

In the leader of that party the veiled lady saw a man with the stony face and blazing eyes of an avenger.

At sight of him all the blood in her body seemed to rush back upon her heart. Faint, dizzy, gasping, she murmured:

"Oh, heaven! It is he!—it is he!"

But the Gentleman from Pike knew nothing of the woman, nor of the emotion his coming stirred in her breast. His stern, implacable eyes were fixed on the flying figure of the Frisco Sharp. Through his brain seethed the one thought:—

"Now we are man to man! He shall account!"

CHAPTER XVII.

MAN TO MAN.

Even when an ignominious death menaced the Frisco Sharp, the strange lady to whom he appealed had not urged him to flight, nor betrayed any outward signs of discomposure. But that this was the result of a strong effort of the will was proved by the fact that, the moment he was gone, she sunk back in her seat panting and unnerved.

"Again he crosses my path!" she murmured, behind her veil. "Once he was my evil genius. Will he be so again? No. But for my fickle vanity his treachery would have fallen powerless. Ah! I have suffered since then! I have drunk the bitter dregs of—sin? Well, *fashionable* sin! It was to drown remorse—a futile effort!"

"To hold the crown of life, and to throw it away! Ah! the recollection has driven me to desperation. I have sought reprisals; but surcease of pain is not to be found in inflicting suffering on others.

"And now this hope! Can the past be redeemed? Twelve years! Has he ever forgiven me? My constancy must move him. Oh, it must—it *must*! I will go down on my knees—"

But here her soliloquy was cut short. The party in pursuit of the Frisco Sharp swept past, and she caught sight of their leader—the Gentleman from Pike.

At sight of him the lady gasped convulsively, and started forward from her seat with clasped hands.

"Oh, Heaven! It is he!—it is he!" she cried.

Then with hands that quivered like aspen leaves she tore her veil aside, and thrust from the coach window a face utterly devoid of color, gazing after the receding horseman with eyes that flashed like black diamonds.

"Oh, Will! Will! my darling!" she panted. "To have found you again, after all these years!"

Then swift-coming tears hid him from sight, though she dashed them away impatiently; and sobs convulsed her until she sunk back into her seat, overcome with excess of emotion.

Meanwhile, the Gentleman from Pike, being better mounted, had distanced his comrades and gained upon the flying road-agent.

There was a terrible look on his passion-distorted face. Its white fury and the merciless glitter of his eyes were fairly demonic.

"Now we are man to man!" he muttered between his clenched teeth. "One of us must die! I have not sought him. When fate gave him into my hands I let him escape. Why did he not stay away? He has courted my vengeance. On his head be it! Bah! he has forfeited his worthless life a score of times. Why need I feel compunctious about executing what the law of any land would sanction? No. I will not withhold my hand. *He dies!* Yet he shall have an equal chance. I am no murderer. I will kill his horse; and then he shall fight me, man to man."

The speaker looked over his shoulder. His companions were not in sight. He listened. He could hear the clang of their horses' hoofs far down the mountain gorge.

"I have gained sufficiently upon them. We can have it out before they come up," he mused.

Then he put spurs to his horse, and the animal dashed forward at increased speed, showing that his master had purposely prolonged the chase that, when he overtook the Frisco Sharp, they two might be alone.

Soon he closed the intervening space, until the flying road-agent was within pistol range. Then he deliberately took aim, not at the man, but at the horse, and fired.

In the early part of the race the Frisco Sharp had glanced over his shoulder and discovered who was the only pursuer he had cause to fear.

After that he did not look round, but rode erect in the saddle, giving his whole attention to the management of his horse. It was plain that he made the most of the animal's speed and bottom; but beyond that he seemed to have no concern.

"Is it come at last?" he mused, with the spirit of fatalism. "It is sure to come in the end. Well, I will lose no chance. If my utmost effort fails, it will be because it is decreed. And she is here. What place more unlikely for us three to meet! I wonder if fate has sent her to witness the punishment of my perfidy and hers?"

It looks that way. Else, why is she here? Heigho! life's a game of poker, after all. If you don't draw the cards, you can't bluff forever. I've always played mine for all they were worth, and never 'squealed' when I got beat; and I'll do it to the end. So here goes for the grand match—perhaps the *rubber*!"

He drew a revolver, turned in his saddle, and fired. But, strange to say, if the antagonism between these men was so deadly, he too fired at the horse, and not at the rider.

A cry of pain from Carleton's horse showed that the Frisco Sharp was no bungler with the pistol.

Then, speeding at break-neck pace along pass and precipice, shot after shot was exchanged by these strange foemen, neither of whom aimed at the other's life until the horse in advance sunk lifeless in his tracks, and his rider, alighting agilely on his feet, stood beside him with folded arms, awaiting his doom!

There was no fear in his face as he turned it toward the man who had hunted him down. Even in the last grand defeat he preserved the inscrutable mask of the gambler.

Dashing up to him with unabated speed, the Gentleman from Pike drew his horse upon his haunches, and leaped to the ground.

The animal stood panting, and gazing fearfully at the dead of his own species.

The men presented a strange contrast—the one with drawn revolver so shaken by passion, the other with arms folded across his breast as unmoved as marble.

"Now we are face to face!" cried the Gentleman from Pike—"not by my seeking, but because, with your wonted perversity, you chose to stay where your life was forfeit after I gave you a chance to escape. Then you was at a disadvantage. Now we are man to man. If I fall, there stands a horse that will easily carry you beyond pursuit. Come! draw your weapon! We have no time to waste!"

The Frisco Sharp smiled icily.

"Fire!" he said. "Fate has given you the opportunity, and your vengeance is just. As for me, do you think that I could draw a weapon against *your* mother's son, even if I had cause, which God knows I have not?"

"I do not share your nice scruples," said the Gentleman from Pike, sternly; "and you shall not escape me by any such jugglery. Draw, if you are not a coward as well as a villain!"

The lip of the road agent curled with disdain.

"I can afford not to resent a charge which, as you make it, you know to be without foundation," he said. "Do you think that I would avoid death at your hands by subterfuge? No, you know better."

"Draw, I command you again!" said the other, waving his hand as if impatiently brushing aside idle subtleties. "I am no murderer. I give you an equal chance. But both of us cannot leave this spot alive! Draw, I say, before I shoot you down like a dog!"

The Frisco Sharp stood motionless, his great brown eyes fixed upon the face of his enemy, not with fear or anger, but with sadness, awaiting his doom.

Carleton raised his cocked revolver and trained it on a line with the other's forehead, just between the eyes.

"Draw!" he commanded, in a choking voice.

Jules St. Auburn moved not a muscle!

"Then *die*!"

Just coming into sight, those who had been under Carleton's leadership saw this picture—the dead and the living horse; the man with folded arms and him with revolver extended at arm's length; and, around, the riven rocks, bearing witness to the terrible convulsions of nature, fit setting for the deadly passions of men!

A moment of awful suspense followed.

Then the hand that was wont to be as firm as rock began to tremble—the eye that could overlook the mountain lion wavered—the man of iron resolve was shaken to his inmost soul!

His arm sunk to his side. His head drooped on his breast. His face worked convulsively. His breast labored with a sob.

"I cannot—I cannot!" he almost moaned.

"Go!—go!"

No look of surprise, or relief, or gratitude appeared in the face of the Frisco Sharp. He accepted the smile of Fortune just as he had received her frown.

Without question or hesitancy he took his late foe at his word, mounted the living horse, and, not looking back, rode away before the oncoming mountainmen just as he had ridden before their leader.

The surprise of the party may better be imagined than described. A murmur of wonder and discontent was on every lip. But when they came up to where their leader stood on the verge of the precipice, not heeding them, but gazing into vacancy, his white, set face and the slumbrous fire of his eyes abashed them, and no one durst question his strange conduct.

But one frowned in sullen hatred, and let his mutterings be heard.

The Gentleman from Pike turned his eyes upon him—a terrible look.

Big Mose Finley slunk behind his comrades, cowed.

The men accepted the pursuit of the road-agent as at an end. No one had the temerity to continue the chase in the face of their leader's tacit decision.

O'Connor dismounted and led his horse forward with awkward diffidence.

"Will yer honor, Musther Cairleton, accept the loan o' me poor baste?" he asked. "Sure, surr—"

"No, thank you," replied the Gentleman from Pike. "The coach will be along presently."

The men sat their horses apart, whispering among themselves, until the stage arrived.

The Gentleman from Pike entered and took a seat, too much engrossed in his own gloomy thoughts to give a glance at the lady occupant, who a few minutes before had called after him with so passionate an appeal.

Now she shrank trembling in her corner, her veil closely drawn, and no subtle instinct warned him of the vicinity of—

CHAPTER XVIII.

FACE TO FACE.

WHILE the Gentleman from Pike sat immersed in gloomy thought, the breast of the strange lady was torn by a storm of conflicting emotions—hope and fear, love and remorse. It was well that her thick veil hid her agitated face—the pallid cheeks, the quivering lips, the tear-streaming eyes that scanned every lineament of the man's clouded countenance, with a longing unutterable.

"That they should meet!" she mused, with a sick quailing of the heart—"and at this of all times! Oh! it will harden his heart against me, even if I might have won his forgiveness. Did he overtake him? They must have recognized each other. Can he have killed him? Oh! how my folly, my weakness, my wickedness wrecked all our lives! Will! Will! I loved you, for all!"

Bearing this strangely united yet divided pair, the stage-coach rumbled and swayed and bounced into Angel's Find, a more pretentious place than the parent Hard Luck, boasting a regular weekly coach, a stamp-mill, and last, not least in the pride of some, the Metropolitan Hotel, into which the No-tic had bloomed.

Our hero leaped from the coach, and assisted the lady to alight, from habitual courtesy, not looking at her.

How her hand trembled while it rested for a moment in his!

"Oh! if he but knew!" she mused. "Would he be as kind?"

Then he was gone, and the lady, almost with tottering steps, entered the hotel.

Once in her room, she threw herself face downward on the bed and gave way to a storm of tears.

"Oh! he will never forgive me! he will never forgive me!" she sobbed, in despair. "He will spurn me from him as a polluted wretch, I know! But he *must* forgive me! he *shall* forgive me!" she pursued, sudden passion burning up her tears, as she sprang up and began to pace the room. "I wonder what passed between him and Jules. If he stands in my way—"

She left off, stopping abruptly in the middle of the floor, and her clenched hands, and set teeth, her frown and the flash of her black eyes were not pleasant to see. Evidently her nature was not all softness.

Descending to the hotel parlor, she summoned the landlord—Sutler Bob the "boys" still called him, though his advertisement in the *Desert News* read:—"ROBT. HIGGINS, Prop."

He placed himself at the service of his guest with all the chivalry of Western deference to woman.

"Will you please to tell me who is the gentleman who assisted me from the coach?" she asked.

"The Gentleman from Pike you mean, ma'am?" replied Sutler Bob. "Waal, I reckon he's the boss o' this hyar town. He runs the quartz-crusher you see on yonder raise o' ground. A man—"

But the lady interrupted him breathlessly—

"The Gentleman from Pike!"

She flushed scarlet, then turned pale. She was thinking of what Moxey had told her of a man called thus.

Sutler Bob stared in wonder and curiosity at her emotion.

"That's the handle he goes by in these parts," he said, slowly.

"A strange name," murmured the lady, perhaps to cover her confusion.

"Thar's no accountin' fur tastes," as the old woman said when she mistook a package of pepper for a snuff-box," replied Sutler Bob, oracularly.

"A married man?" asked the lady.

Sutler Bob grinned.

"Waal, ma'am," he replied, "this hyar ain't a likely country fur to speak knowledgably in sich things consarnin' any man. Ye see, when a pilgrim shakes the States an' strikes his pick into the soil o' this glorious western country, he mostly proposes to start in on a clear title. Ten

to one he gets a sheriff's deed?" laughed Sutler Bob.

The lady changed the subject abruptly.

"Did you hear the story of his encounter with the man who stopped the coach?"

"The Frisco Sharp? Waal, now, thar's somethin' curious about that. The boys allows thar's somethin' between them two. Not that they go cahoots, ye understand; though the Gent has let Frisco off twice; which the same looks a little queer to a man up a tree, allowin' that they hate each other like p'ison."

Sutler Bob told the story of St. Auburn's strange encounter with the Gentleman from Pike, as witnessed by the "boys," then proceeded to philosophize:

"This hyar's what gets everybody—of the Gent wanted to let him off, why did he shoot his hoss? He had the pistol to his head when the boys come in sight; an' all of a sudden he seemed to wilt, an' he was all broke up."

Perhaps the lady had the key to the riddle; for when she was alone again she paced her room in a new excitement.

"He loves me still!" she murmured. "Else why would he be so deeply moved? I must see him at once! A look may bridge all the bitter past."

"But this girl," she pursued; "who is she? What are her relations with him?"

The pallor of a jealous fear overspread her cheek.

"Can she be beautiful?" she mused—"more beautiful than I?"

She turned to the little square looking glass. It showed her a *petite* figure and piquant, coquettish face—a face and figure that disguised her age, making her look at least ten years younger than she really was.

"Bah!" she mused disdainfully, "what have I to fear? Some mountain hoiden! I have culture, refinement, style. They will count most with him."

But a feverish unrest possessed her, and just in the gloaming she left the hotel, to wander toward what she had heard called the "Angel's Lodge."

A few minutes after her departure a rather small man in rough miner's garb entered the office of the Metropolitan and examined the register. The last entry was—

"MRS. BELLA SEAFORD,
SAN FRANCISCO, CAL."

The miner was seized with a sudden fit of trembling, and his spasmodic grip rumbled the page.

"Hallo, thar, stranger!" shouted Sutler Bob. "What's the matter with you? Are you drunk?"

Mumbling some inarticulate apology, the miner slouched his hat further over his eyes and left the room and the town, passing the Angel's Lodge.

The sun sunk behind the mountain-peaks, and the moon took her place in the heavens.

In the wilderness of rocks and woods the miner lifted his hat to let the cool night wind fan his fevered temples. The silver light, streaming over him, disclosed the features of the Frisco Sharp.

"It is she," he mused. "I knew it. I have followed her into the lion's den. She will yet lure me to my doom! Hal' what's this?"

He shrunk to cower at the sound of footsteps.

Into the moonlit glade which he had just vacated came a man with a strange, rapt light in his steady gray eyes. He swung his hat carelessly in one hand, while he ran the fingers of the other through his hair with nervous restlessness.

There was a grand, uplifted look about him, as if his soul had been flooded with a new happiness, a new hope. It dilated his frame, it irradiated his face, it thrilled in the tones of his voice as he asked himself, aloud, with a sort of exultant defiance:

"Why not?"

As if in answer to his question, the figure of a woman appeared at the other side of the glade. She sunk on her knees in the moonlight and raised her clasped hand and tear-streaming eyes to him in a mute appeal.

The man stopped and stared at the woman in dumb amazement.

A crimson cloud seemed to float before the vision of the Frisco Sharp; the smell of blood was in his nostrils; the sound of rushing waters in his ears; his brain was in a whirl; murder was in his heart!

Scarcely conscious of what he did, he drew his revolver from its holster.

Then—

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GENTLEMAN FROM PIKE AT HOME.

THE strange conduct of the Gentleman from Pike was thoroughly canvassed in the bar of the Metropolitan. Big Mose Finley was open in his reprehension, and found supporters among the worst men of the town.

"I tell ye what it is, gents," he said, "it's mighty curious when one man gets so high an' mighty that he kin stand off a hull town. Who ever heard o' lettin' a road-agent slide when ye had him dead to rights? It 'ud take a power o' soap to make me believe that thar wa'n't a nig-

ger in the fence *somewhar*. I allow the time hain't fur off when this burg 'll have to have a ginerel show o' hands all round; an' then some o' these white-livered individooals will open their eyes."

"Co-rect!" assented one burly knave.

"Now's as good a time as any, accordin' to my notion," suggested another.

"All I want is backin'," said Mose. "Come, put up ur shut up! Who's a-givin' of us wind, an' who's got the sand to back up their chin-music?"

"Hold on, gents," interposed Mose. "Jest remember it's a bad man you're proposin' to handle. After you set the ball a-rollin', hev you kalkulated whar it's goin to fetch up?"

"I reckon a man's only a man."

"But this hyar's a party hefty one."

"L'arnt some o' his tricks on the road, no doubt."

"You know better, Mose. He ain't that sort."

"Maybe you're his pard, as well as the Frisco Sharp."

"Not much! No more is he in with Frisco. Why, boys, a man with half an eye could see that thar was a red-hot b'ilin' between them two. Let 'em alone, I say, an' it'll be dog eat dog afore long, take my word fur it. When the thing *does* come to a head, then stand from under!"

Whether it was that many held to this view, or because they dreaded the prowess of the man under discussion, at any rate Mose did not get the backing he had invited.

"All right, gents," he growled. "I see jest what this hyar town's worth. Ef you see him laid out some fine mornin' without none o' your help, don't ask me who done it!"

Though all knew big Mose Finley for a desperate character, no one realized the result that this threat was destined to work.

Meanwhile, the Gentleman from Pike, careless of what judgment public opinion passed on him, had sought his own home.

His gentle ward espied him coming, and with her blonde hair flying loose in the wind, ran to meet him.

"Oh, Will! I've such a supper! Just what you—"

But here her pride in her culinary triumph was suddenly forgotten. She saw that something had disturbed him more deeply than she had seen him moved since that strange parting with the Frisco Sharp in the night-shadowed woods.

It was yet an unsolved mystery to her. Without question she had soothed him with her love. Now she undertook the task anew. Slipping her hand into his, she walked silently by his side.

The man was touched. He made a brave effort to throw off his gloom, that it might not cloud her happiness.

"I have a treasure in my little housekeeper, I know," he said, trying to smile.

She looked shyly up into his face. Might her cheerfulness woo him from his trouble? She would try.

"The venison is done to a turn," she said, smiling again. "And the potatoes!—they are snow-browned in a quick oven!"

She rippled a silvery laugh at her jest, and felt repaid when he affectionately stroked her hair as they entered the cabin.

Within all was as neat as a new pin. The cloth was so snowy that it did not matter that the table beneath it was plain pine instead of walnut. If the cups and saucers were delf instead of china, one forgot the fact in sipping the nectar they contained. As for the viands that smoked on the clean-swept hearth, their toothsome-ness disguised the steel knife and fork better than a triple plating of silver.

A basin "that you could see your face in," freshly filled from the sparkling mountain rill, awaited the lord of the manor, together with an honest crash towel that had no reason to envy the more pretentious Turkish.

Clear, cold water was a wonderful antidote for ill's spiritual, as well as physical; and while the master of the house was making himself a new man by nature's simple medicament, the young housewife fitted hither and thither like a fluttering bird-mother, and set a banquet fit for a king, made poetical by an artistic arrangement of fern leaves.

How the delicate color came and went in her fair cheeks—how her eyes danced—how her breath fluttered with pleasurable anticipation, as she captured him and led him to his place at the head of the table! It was touching to see how self-complacency and shy timidity struggled for the ascendancy, as she waited for his approval.

Somehow, the great brightness she brought into his life impressed him deeply to-night, the more deeply by contrast with the shadowed part that he had just been recalling; and when he looked down into her upturned, expectant face, there was a strange humidity in his eyes that no one but she ever was allowed to see. He had not been ashamed even to let silent tears course down his cheeks in her presence.

Now he bent and kissed her sunny hair, and said, in a voice somewhat husky with emotion:

"It is perfect, dear. After all, there is a gold

more precious than that which we dig out of the earth. You are the warmth and brightness and perfume of my home, little housekeeper—little home-keeper!"

She blushed with pleasure. Her lustrous eyes sought his for a moment with an indescribable look—a look that thrilled him strangely, and awakened new thoughts.

What was it? An answering look in his eyes! With a subtle, gliding motion she slipped from his encircling arm, inspired, it seemed, with a sudden shyness that drove the color from her cheek, and left her pale and tremulous.

Then she sat down in her place at the opposite side of the table, and tried to look matronly as she poured his tea.

It plainly cost her an effort to appear natural and at her ease. What was the meaning of that nervous incertitude, that shrinking timidity, and those thrills of unreasoning delight? She felt as if she must burst into tears, if she for a moment relaxed the restraint over her emotions. Was it with excess of happiness, or with a vague pain? She did not know.

And for the first time in her life she had a secret from "brother Will." For all the world she must not let him know!—oh, no! no! no! She blushed at the very thought.

Just what it was, or why it must be hidden, she would have found it impossible to put into words; but the feeling was there, all the same—the most powerful she had ever experienced.

Opposite sat the man, and, not appearing to do so, watched the rapidly shifting changes in her ingenuous countenance, and over his soul crept a great wonder, a great gratitude, and a great peace!

The girl chatted incessantly, flitting from theme to theme with an abruptness of transition which showed that she was not thinking of what she was talking about. Her vivacity and sparkle was a new revelation, even in her sunny nature.

The man replied quietly, almost in monosyllables; but there was nothing of sadness in his manner, now.

After the meal, he could not trust himself to sit with her as was his wont. She had a fashion of playfully tumbling his hair and then combing it, to produce various, oftentimes ludicrous, effects, which she lightened by making corresponding modifications in his dress.

Now she would tie her handkerchief about his throat, like a "choker," button up his coat, and brush his hair "slick," in the ministerial style. A moment later she would have his hair tossed "seven ways for Sunday," his collar pulled up, and his hat slouched over his brows, like a veritable brigand!

How gleefully she would laugh. How she would do him mock reverence in one character, and pretend to be afraid of him in the other. How childlike was this innocent little girl-woman, after all!

And the man who could awe a furious mob with a glance of his eye, enjoyed it—indeed, at such times, seemed scarcely less a child than she. The fact spoke well for his heart.

But to-night he was afraid to put himself in this position. He must get away and think it out by himself.

She scarcely understood the excuse he made to get away from her. When he had left the house she ran to her room, and hiding her face in the pillow, gave way to the flood of tears with which she had been struggling. That passed, to be succeeded by a strange sense of elation, and she flitted about the house with a lightsome step, singing like a bird.

Her face was irradiate; her eyes took on a new brightness; the supple grace of her movements became a rhythmic poem; her beauty would have been a revelation, even to those who knew her best.

And at this crowning moment a pair of black eyes were regarding her from out in the darkness, and in a woman's heart was being kindled the fires of a maddening jealousy.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RIVALS.

MORE than one masculine eye brightened at the sight of Mrs. Bella Seaford, as she left the Metropolitan. The homage of Angel's Find embodying itself in rude metaphor, she was pronounced a "crusher," a "screamer," and a "daisy."

Everybody asked everybody else who she was, "whar she come from," and what "call" she had at Angel's Find—to all of which the reply was, in substance:—

"Blowed ef I know. With I did! Bet ye even that she stays, ur that she don't stay. What d'ye say? Is it a go?"

The enthusiasm of Angel's Find always found one vent. Every man was ready to "back" his opinion "for all he was worth" in matters of far less moment than that graceful walk. "Ef a dainty bit o' caliker like that wa'n't 'woth losin' yer money on, there wa'n't nothin'!"

Perhaps the lady was used to admiration. Certainly she paid no heed to the "boom" spontaneously tendered her by the citizens of Angel's Find. The broadest smile of homage failed to attract her notice. Even Judge Wiggins's ruffled shirt bosom and alligator skin boots

won no recognition from her. The judge "went to sleep on them boots," and their failure, in this instance, to "draw" chagrined him not a little.

As for the "boys," such indifference "stumped 'em all round."

Had they but known the fierce warfare going on within that beautiful little head, perhaps this insensibility to outward things would have been accounted for.

"Is she younger than I? Is she more beautiful than I? Shall I encounter a successful rival on the very outset? The 'Angel of Hard Luck,' and 'Angel's Find'! H'm!"

Mrs. Bella Seaford compressed her red lips; the delicate color faded from her rounded cheeks; her black eyes snapped with an ominous fire. In this mood she was beautiful still, yet with a cruel sort of beauty. And, come to think, there was something cat-like in the daintiness with which she picked her way along the road.

As she approached the buildings which constituted the Angel's Lodge property, she distinguished through the gathering gloom the mining works proper and an unpretentious yet comfortable cabin a little removed from the bustle of money-getting.

Here all was beauty and perfume and peace. "Flowers and trailing vines," mused Mrs. Seaford, her heart sinking cold, then leaping all a flame in her breast. "She is not a mountain savage, for she has neatness and taste. All the harsh features are hidden beneath a mantle of verdure. She has made his home a paradise, in spite of her meager means. What is she like personally? Hark!"

Her ear caught a sound that caused her to stop abruptly.

An untrained voice, yet as clear and sweet as a silver bell. The melody must have been improvised. There were no words; only a succession of rich notes, as a bird might have sung.

How smoothly the varying cadences flowed into one another!—how they rippled like happy laughter!—how they sunk into languishing pathos, only to swell into a burst of triumphant exultation!

Mrs. Seaford stood with clenched hands and set teeth, and grew as cold as ice.

"That woman is a genius," she said, hoarsely; "and she is happy. Is she happy in love? Is she singing to him?"

Stealthily she crept forward. Both door and window stood open. A tallow dip burning in the room disclosed a woman ranging on a dresser dishes which she had just finished washing.

At sight of her Bella Seaford turned sick at heart.

"Ten years younger than I, and— Ah!"

She could not bring herself to admit, even to herself, that her rival was more beautiful.

"She is alone," mused the envious woman. "This is my opportunity to speak to her. I must see what she is like. She may be uncouth and slangy, for all her—"

She avoided the name of beauty.

"I beg your pardon. Will you think me intrusive, to come to you a perfect stranger, without introduction? But everything is so strange, and I felt so lonesome, and indeed a little timid, in a hotel without another woman in it—even the cook and chambermaid (if such a name is appropriate) a Chinaman! I heard you spoken of, and thought that I must make your acquaintance before I slept, even at the risk of coming out alone at so unseemly an hour. And then I have not yet thanked Mr. Carleton for rescuing me from a situation of terrible danger. Oh! I was so frightened that I lost all presence of mind—even to seeming remiss in courtesy, I am afraid.

"May I present myself? I am Mrs. Seaford, of San Francisco. And you are—Mrs. Carleton?"

Such was Bella Seaford's apology and self-introduction.

Lilian Amberleigh, whose heart at that moment went out to all the world in a glad tenderness which she would have been at a loss to explain, was not disposed to carp at any slight deviation from social forms, even if the code of mountain etiquette had been far more stringent than that which actually obtains in the free West.

She first started at the sound of a strange voice; then smiled a genial welcome, upon seeing the most beautiful lady she remembered ever to have met, only excepting her long lost and tenderly mourned mother; and, last, flamed scarlet from chin to temple at being called Mrs. Carleton.

"I am very glad that you came, Mrs. Seaford," she said, stammering a little with embarrassment. "Strangers do not stand on ceremony here. But you mistake in supposing me a married woman. I keep house for my brother."

How famously blushing became her style of beauty! Bella Seaford hated her for that, as well as for other things, which, indeed, seemed to multiply, the more she saw of her.

How refined her manner! how pure her accent! From where she stood Bella Seaford could see books and magazines. So she had been under William Carleton's tutelage? Nature had prepared a rich soil for his seeds of instruction!

"Oh! I beg your pardon, Miss Carleton," said her guest. "Mr. Carleton is your brother, then?"

Again Lilian Amberleigh's cheek flushed crimson.

"Not my *real* brother," she corrected; "though he has been that, and father and mother to me as well, ever since I lost my own dear mamma, almost in my babyhood."

A tender humidity dimmed her eyes, and a pathetic cadence crept into her voice. The memory of her mother always evoked these tokens of loving regret.

"But my name is Lilian Amberleigh," she pursued, her sunny nature reasserting itself instantly. "Pray come in and be seated. I beg your pardon for neglecting to invite you more promptly. Believe me, it was not from lack of cordiality."

No! Bella Seaford would not accept even the offer of a chair from the rival she already hated with an intensity beyond words, though her smiling face gave no token of the bitterness it masked.

"Thank you, I will sit down just here, if you please," she said, with the sweetest suavity, selecting a rustic bench that surrounded the trunk of a mountain pine. "I have been housed all my life. It is a treat to me to be out of doors in this wonderful country. Everything is so strange, and yet so delightful. But one would not suppose that the wilderness could be made so like a paradise as this spot, just here."

It had been a labor of love to Lilian. Now, as her eye roved over the work of her own hands, as revealed in the mellow moonlight, her heart swelled, remembering for whose pleasure it had all been done.

But need we follow their conversation in detail? Bella Seaford sat and chatted pleasantly, to all outward seeming, with this girl whom nature had so richly dowered, while every word, every gesture, every tone was a separate stab. She noted every tremor of the delicate lips, every flush of the sensitive cheek, every brightening of the eye, every tender modulation of the voice, as she led her to talk of her guardian.

"She loves him! Oh! how I hate her for it! And does he love her? I will crush her, if he does!"

Those were her thoughts when she bade Lilian Amberleigh—ah! how unsuspecting!—good-night. But the forms of politeness were on her lips, the cadences of friendliness in her voice. Only when she got away out of sight and hearing did her true feeling burst its way into speech.

She had declined Lilian's offer to accompany her back to her hotel. She did not go there directly. She felt that she could not pass under human observation, until she had battled with the fiends of hatred and despair. They crowded upon her so fiercely that she must yield them sway for a little time at least.

So she turned from the path. She had enough physical courage, little as she was, to feel no personal fear. And there in the forest solitude she gave the rein to her emotions.

Then her beauty was transformed. Her passion convulsed face, not to consider the reckless words that forced their way from her lips in hoarse mutterings and sharp, almost savage, cries, showed that she was a wicked and desperate woman.

"To win him from her, if I can—to crush her, if I fail!—that is the task before me!" she muttered. "And I will do it!—I will do it! I will stop at nothing! She has robbed me. I but reclaim my own. Let her look to herself!"

"Oh, my darling! I have loved you always! And to find you thus! But you must return to me!—you shall return!"

The battle was at his height when she heard approaching footsteps. He entered a moonlit glade just before her. She acted on the impulse of the moment, advanced, and sunk on her knees at his feet!

She had put her destiny to the touch. What would be the decree of fate?

CHAPTER XXI.

HOPE CRUSHED TO EARTH.

WHEN our hero left his home with a vague excuse, it was with a mind almost as much perturbed as that of the girl from whose presence he went. What was this revelation that had so suddenly burst upon him? The tenderest affection had always existed between him, and his fair charge, and heretofore its manifestation had been as free as that between any brother and sister. But now— He scarcely dared face the truth!

Was all the delightful past to be changed? Should he lose his little sister? What would take her place?

He asked the question with a vague sense of pain. The old freedom lost, what would they be to each other?

For the first time in his life he asked himself:—

"What does the world say of our position?"

Then hot flashes and icy chills followed each other in quick succession from his heart to his extremities, and he stopped short, panting and

trembling. An altogether unreasonable rage suddenly possessed him.

"I should like to see the man who *dares* lisp a syllable—entertain a thought—to her disparagement!"

And his hand fell on the butt of his revolver.

But the unsuitableness of that means to reach the evil, if evil there were, was patent at once; and the keenest sense of regret succeeded his transient anger.

"And have I unwittingly exposed her to this?" he mused. "Her false position must be corrected at once. But alas! I shall lose her, in its accomplishment. She has grown a part of my life. How can I tear her out of it? And what can I say to her?—how explain the necessity of parting without wounding her sense of delicacy beyond repair?"

"Ah, how heedless I have been! A woman would have foreseen this fatal dilemma; but I have lived on from day to day, never perceiving that she has ceased to be a little girl, and that a new rule must regulate her life.

"And she, in her innocence, my little sister in feeling, has known no other thought. But now—"

Leaving the world out of the question, could they continue the old life? Were they the same in heart that they had been that morning? No!—he could not but admit the change.

Their life-path had narrowed until they could no longer walk side by side. They must walk as one, or separate! The former alternative did not occur to him yet. He thought only that he must lose her.

"But where can she live?" he asked himself.

"Not alone in a hotel—a child like her. Not in a cabin by herself.

"Ah! An idea! I might get an elderly woman to live with us, and so retain my darling, and preserve the proprieties as well."

He was in a fever of excitement over this solution.

"But where to get the chaperon?"

And an icy chill fell upon his hopes.

"I might send her to school?" he reflected.

"Young ladies attend boarding school beyond her age. Seventeen! She would be provided for two or three years."

And then:—

"What! send her away where I could not see her for a single hour in the twenty-four? I could not endure such cruel privation as that. And she would grieve, I know."

"No; we must not be parted. But how remain together? *Together!*"

He stopped, breathless.

"*Together!*"

What was the magic of that word?

A profuse perspiration burst from every pore in his body. He stood still, trembling and passing his fingers through his hair, a trick he had on those rare occasions when he gave way to nervous excitement.

"Ay, together—as one! Why not?" he asked himself, with a great burst of triumphant delight. "Why not? *Why not? WHY NOT?*"

He kept repeating the question, and his tremulous happiness augmented with every iteration.

"Surely we already love each other sufficiently. It is this very love that was to part us! Why not unite us? How stupid I have been! Why not unite us?"

Ah! why not unite them? Was there no reason?

"Link my blighted life with her fresh young existence!" he asked. "Oh! but what is the use of talking? I can never make her mine. I know it in my heart. I cannot bind her to a—a—*criminal!* My God."

He covered his face with his hands, and was terribly shaken.

"A fugitive from justice, to contaminate her pure life—to be her husband, the father of her children! No! no! no!" he groaned.

Then came the agonized protest:

"But I am not guilty in the sight of God! Oh! He cannot condemn me! He knows that that moment of madness has been atoned by years of contrition. He knows the provocation, the agony, the despair! It was not I! No! no! no! With such a blot on my soul I could not have been to her what I have been. She so pure—some instinct must have made her revolt."

"No! that has clouded my life long enough. I will put it behind me. Twelve years! The world has forgotten it. God has forgiven it. He himself has vouchsafed me this chance of happiness. Why should not I accept it?"

Again he asked himself:

"*Why not?*"

And the longer he contemplated this bright promise the higher mounted his eager hope, until the man was transfigured.

Then came his answer, as if the very heavens had placed it before him—a woman—kneeling at his feet in the moonlight!

One moment her agonized face with its tear-streaming eyes, all clearly defined in the flood of moonlight, was lifted to his amazed his horrified vision; then her head sunk upon her breast, as if she were blighted by his stony stare.

The man uttered not a sound. He drew a step nearer, and with hands that trembled like aspen

leaves lifted her face again to the light, gazing at it with such incredulous questioning as that with which he might look upon one returned from the grave, and with such despair as if he stood face to face with his doom.

The woman submitted passively, then suddenly caught his hand and pressed it to her lips and bosom, crying in an agony of piteous appeal:

"Oh, Will!"

As if it were the coil of a serpent, he threw off her clasp with a gasping shudder, and leaped back. Then, with his hand to his head, he staggered against the trunk of a tree, groaning:

"She!—alive! My God!"

A wail of despair escaped the woman's lips, and she drooped again, as if beneath a blight.

From the darkness that surrounded the moonlit glade came a faint sigh. The tension of jealous hatred to which the Frisco Sharp was wrought relaxed. He returned his pistol to its holster. The temptation to murder passed by him for the time. He waited and watched in silence.

Then, a throb of mad jealousy piercing her heart, the woman threw off her despair and rose to her feet ready to do battle for her claims.

CHAPTER XXII

THE WOMAN'S APPEAL.

PEN can but faintly depict the marked transition in Mrs. Seaford's demeanor. She had fairly groveled at this man's feet in her abject supplication. Now she stood with her head thrown defiantly back, her diminutive figure drawn to its greatest height.

"So!" she fairly hissed, "my being alive is matter of chagrin to you. And you make little effort to conceal the fact. I fear Mr. Carleton has forgotten the high chivalry of his earlier life.

The man did not reply to her sarcasm. He had not yet recovered from the shock of her unexpected appearance.

The woman continued in the same passionate tone:

"One would think that the knowledge that your soul was not indelibly stained by blood would come to you with a sense of relief. Has your hate been so implacable as to keep remorse at bay?"

Still the man was silent, struggling with emotions that completely mastered him. This one thought kept throbbing in his brain:

"She!—alive!"

Yesterday he would have hailed this knowledge with a sense of relief. But to-day—Ah! what change a few short hours had wrought! What did her life signify to him now?

"Ruin!—utter ruin!" he reflected, the light of his hope only realized by the shock with which it had been dashed to earth. "Ruin to me, and—God help my darling—to her! Until this very hour I have been blind to the love that has grown day by day, in my heart; and now it has burst upon me like a glimpse of heaven, only that the gate should be closed in my very face! And she—what has she done? Could not I have been made to suffer, and she, the innocent one, have been spared?"

But the woman's voice cut short his bitter reflections.

Her eyes snapped viciously. Her lips drew back with a feline disclosure of the teeth. Her nostrils became pinched, showing a white spot on either side. She was the impersonation of mad jealousy.

"But no," she sneered, "I am losing sight of a circumstance which no doubt more than offsets any relief of conscience. I have seen the lady—throwing the venom of an adder's sting into the insult—of whose caresses my coming will rob you—"

But now the man was galvanized into a paroxysm of passionate life. Springing forward, he towered above her with uplifted hand and brows as black as night, like a terrible destroyer.

"Not a word!" he thundered—"not a word from such as you!—or, as there is a God in heaven—"

But he choked with the intensity of his passion.

A man would have been awed by his terrible presence. An enraged woman knows no personal fear.

"Such as I?" she repeated.

"Ay! Let not your polluted lips sully the name of one as pure as you are foul! I have suffered much from you. You can add nothing to the past."

It was now the woman's turn to struggle with emotion so violent that she could scarcely speak.

"Liar! Slanderer!" she finally burst forth. "I defy you to the proof! Traitor to obligations the most sacred!—defamer of her you had sworn to protect—the blighting of my life I owe to your infamous misconstruction of a foolish girl's caprice! Now do you think by this bluster to deter me from asserting my rights, even if they cannot be maintained where one is so lost to honor and manhood as you? No! I swear to drag from her usurped position this vile creature who shares your life in despite of the legitimate claimant. You may hope to find a bul-

wark of defense in the lax moral sentiment of this community; but I will make the mountains ring with her infamy and yours, until for very shame you will put her away, if this thing without shame does not slink away and hide herself! Oh, you may threaten! How your manhood has improved by association with her! Do you knock her down when she displeases you? Strike! I defy you!"

For one terrible moment it seemed as if he were indeed about to strike to the earth this woman who dared to vilify the being he had exalted above all others for purity and holiness. Then he gained a sudden self-mastery; and his whole manner changed.

His voice was husky, but its menace had given place to deep grief. His eyes no longer threatening, were fixed upon the woman's white, passionate face with something between pity and earnest entreaty. His towering frame seemed collapsed, as if years had suddenly fallen upon him.

"Stop!" he said. "You are beside yourself. I have been wrong. A word of explanation would have saved us this misunderstanding. In a calmer moment, if not now, you will do me justice, and in your thoughts right an innocent girl whom you have wronged by suspicions as baseless as they are cruel.

"If you have seen her, you know that she is scarcely more than a child. I have been her guardian—her brother, if you will. She has learned to so call me, and regard me as such. An hour's converse with her would satisfy you of this truth, in spite of your prejudice.

"Ten years ago I received her, a little child, from her mother's arms, and saved her from the flood in which that mother perished. I have been faithful to the doomed woman's charge. I have learned to look upon it as a blessing sent by Heaven to ameliorate the bitterness of my wrecked life. I do love her as the one bright thing in my wretched existence; but, in spite of your passionate disparagement, you know me well enough to need no assurance that I am incapable of betraying such innocence.

"That is my explanation. Listen to it, look at the child herself, and you cannot resist its truth. Convinced, you have not the heart to do such deadly injury to one who has never harmed you."

His changed manner constrained the woman's attention. She weighed every word as it fell from his lips. She believed him. Perhaps she had never really thought evil of the girl after seeing her open countenance, bearing on its uplifted brow the seal of innocence.

Now a change came over her. The mad fire of jealousy was eliminated from her bounding blood. Renewed hope came to her like a cool, balm-laden breeze.

That the girl loved him she still believed. Her woman's instinct clung to this conviction. But if he regarded her as a child?—if he loved her as a daughter, or as a sister?

A new impulse caused her pulses to leap. The blood driven from her face by passion, returned in a warm glow. The tense muscles relaxed. The hard lines flowed into curves of grace and softness. The woman was transformed, transfigured! She was beautiful again!

Noting this sudden change, the man shuddered.

"The same angel and devil!" he reflected, bitterly. "Ah! how the one lured me that the other might destroy! But I am proof against her wickeries now. I have seen the ensanguined claws of the siren!"

But the woman knew nothing of what was passing in the man's thoughts. She gave herself up to the accomplishment of an object on which her whole heart was set.

The sinuous motions of her body were like the graceful flexures of a serpent. Her voice glided into sweet, wooing cadences, gentle deprecation curbing an eager longing. Ah! hers was the cunning to sway men's hearts!

"I believe you," she said. "I have been hasty. I did not weigh my words. Oh! forgive me! It is not the first time that my impulsiveness has bred misunderstanding and dissension between us. But believe me, if I have yielded to blind passion and given myself up to desperate action as well as reckless speech, I have always been goaded by my love for you!"

The Gentleman from Pike could not repress a shudder of disgust. He raised his hand with a motion to restrain her, but her importunity pressed on.

"No! hear me out!" she pleaded. "I know your harsh judgment, and admit the seeming justification of appearances. But were she alive, your mother could testify—"

"Stop!" cried the other, hoarsely, his frame convulsed with a spasm of pain—"you must not speak of her!"

The repulse of his manner more than his words fell upon the woman like the chill of an icy wind; but she rallied, and went on:

"Oh! will you not listen? Have all the years not turned the edge of your resentment? I, too, have suffered! My God! what have I not suffered? Were not repudiation punishment bitter enough where the guilt is real? What, then, is it to have rested all these years under unjust condemnation? I swear to you now, as

I would have proved to you then, but for your impetuosity, that I am an innocent, an injured woman! We were victims in common of one man's base treachery! Why did you prejudice me? Why did you give me no chance for self-vindication? After all these years, what would have been easy then is now, alas! almost a hopeless task."

But for the ringing passion of her voice they might have heard a sound proceeding from the darkness that surrounded their little spot of moonlight.

Throughout this interview the Frisco Sharp had listened with an agitation which would have surprised those familiar with his wonted imperturbable nonchalance.

It was remarkable that both these men, usually so impassive, were stirred to their souls' centers when brought under the influence of this woman. Though the result was nearly the same, yet the causes of their impassivity were diametrically opposed. One lived in a fortress of sand into which the missiles of the world sunk and smothered, leaving no trace; the other presented a wall of granite against which they were shattered or glanced harmlessly aside. The defense of one was an inert apathy—of the other an indomitable will. Now this woman awoke passions that burst through the will of the one, and scattered to the winds the fatalistic indifference of the other.

Again and again the Frisco Sharp was so wrought upon that he could scarcely resist the impulse to interrupt the interview. Heretofore it had been in the woman's behalf; but when she declared that they had both been victims of another's treachery, he flushed scarlet and muttered:

"What effrontery! And she has seen and recognized me almost within the hour! I'll not be her scapegoat! I will denounce her if he is weak enough to yield the evidence of his own senses to her blandishments!"

But the Gentleman from Pike was not weak. He had himself well in hand now. The iron of his nature came to the surface—its hardness, its immutability. His voice was not harsh, but immovably firm.

"Your words are futile," he said. "Daily, almost hourly, since that fatal time I have reviewed my judgment only to approve its justice. I was infatuated before; I awakened to reason at last. Do not add to the mountain of deceit by useless falsehood now. The hateful past is dead; let us bury it out of sight and recollection. Go your way and leave me in peace!"

To this dispassionate yet inflexible decision the woman listened breathlessly, with distending eyes and face whitening with terror.

"Stop! Stop!" she cried, casting herself on her knees again, and extending her arms in supplication. "See, Will!—I am at your feet! Oh! listen to me! All these years I have kept on loving you, not asking for hope! A month ago I learned that you had been seen here in the mountains. Only so much. Not a word about you. I did not know how I might find you. I asked only the opportunity to come face to face with you once more. I flew to you. When he came to me in the guise of a common highwayman, I was thunderstruck. But my vail protected me. He did not recognize me. You came next. I could scarcely support the thrill of delight and the agony of fear inspired by the sight of you. You followed him. I have heard the story of that meeting. Then you came back to me. Oh! that ride, I unknown! I touched your foot with mine, so gently that you did not perceive it! I breathed the air that you breathed! I gazed upon you unchided! Then you helped me from the coach, and my hand touched yours! I thought I should die! How did I restrain the impulse to tear aside my vail and cast myself at your feet then and there! Ah! I dared not make myself known, lest my paradise should topple in ruins about my head! I was unspeakably happy and unutterably wretched! It was heaven and hell at the same moment! Now I have revealed myself. You can lift me to a delirium of happiness with a word! Do not dash me to the depths of despair! Hear me! I love you! I have always loved you! Never for a moment has my heart—"

"A—A—A—Ah!"

It was an indescribable cry, so full of blended despair, and fury. In her abandon the woman had clasped the knees of the man to whom she made her wild appeal in words that followed each other with lightning rapidity; and he had shaken her off with a shudder of repulsion.

In that she read the death of her hopes more clearly than any form of words could have conveyed it; and with that maniac cry she fell forward on her face.

Was she unconscious? No; for she clutched the ground with her hands, and every drawn breath was an audible gasp, while every exhalation was a wailing moan.

It was terrible to look at her. It seemed as if that stormy spirit would shake the frail body to ruin.

But the man made no effort to calm her. He did not lift her up. Instead, he who had never been upstart to women turned and rushed

from the spot, leaving her there alone, as he supposed.

The abandonment was cruel, on the surface—unworthy of him, one would have said. But he knew her well. He believed that this was her last appeal.

"She is insincere to the core," he said to himself. "When she sees that I am not to be deceived by any of her arts, she will get up and return to her hotel."

He could not bring himself to touch her. He fled her hated presence.

But he deceived himself. For once, at least, the woman was in earnest. As she realized that he was indeed leaving her, she half rose, extended her arms toward his figure disappearing in the shadows, uttered a faint cry, and sunk again to the ground, unconscious.

Then from his hiding came forth the Frisco Sharp. He knelt and lifted her in his arms, and, while he kissed her still, white face, poured forth a torrent of endearing epithets addressed to her, and wrathful denunciations hurled after the man who had spurned her entreaties and abandoned her in a swoon.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A HUMAN TIGRESS.

In the solitude of the moonlit glade, the Frisco Sharp held in his arms the unconscious form of the woman whose beauty and wickedness had already brought much of evil into his life, and was destined to sink him to even lower depths of iniquity.

Again and again he pressed his lips to her unresponsive ones, until his impassioned kisses seemed to call her back to life.

She opened her eyes. His face, as he bent over her, was in shadow, so that she did not recognize it at first.

With a cry of ecstasy she clasped him about the neck.

"Oh! Will! Will my darling!" she cried. "Your heart has yielded! My love has won! Oh! had you known all, you would never have left me so cruelly! But, perish the past! Let us live and love in the future! My darling! My darling! My darling!"

Between each reiterated endearment she pressed a burning kiss upon the lips of the man who held her in his arms.

Receiving by error that which he had craved, and which would have been priceless to him otherwise, the Frisco Sharp shuddered.

"Stop! stop!" he stammered, hoarsely. "You are making a mistake!"

At the sound of that voice, so different from what she expected, she tore herself from him with a cry of terror, scrambled to her feet, and stood before him trembling and panting.

Remaining on his knees, he turned his white face up to the moonlight, letting its agony plead for him.

"What is the meaning of this?" panted the woman. "Why are you here? Where is—"

But the question died on her lips.

"What does it mean?" repeated the Frisco Sharp. "It means that he who was never worthy of your love has spurned you and deserted you again—once, dead, as he supposed; now, swooned in this deserted spot! Why am I here? The old reason—because I love you! Had I known that on recovering consciousness you would mistake me for him, believe me, I would have spared you and myself!"

"He has gone—gone?" repeated the woman, in a wailing tone.

"To her from whom your coming has separated him!" said the Frisco Sharp, maliciously.

The woman shuddered.

"And yet you will continue to love him?" pursued the man, with jealous bitterness.

"No!" cried Mrs. Seaford, with a sudden burst of fury. "You think too meanly of me. I shall hate him; and her—her—I will crush her!"

She looked like a beautiful demon, as she clenched her hands and stamped her foot.

"Love him!" she went on, with increasing passion. "I have loved him too well already. That love brought me here into the wilderness after him, and laid me a suppliant at his feet. Now he shall see to what hate will prompt me! And you shall help me. I will give you ample opportunity to glut your jealous hatred."

"How?"

"How? By avenging the insult he has put upon me. By annihilating him! He denied me his heart; do you bring me his heart's blood!"

The Frisco Sharp shuddered and shook his head.

"You know that I cannot raise my hand against his life," he said, gloomily.

"What?" cried the woman, ferociously.

"His life must be ever sacred to me."

"Coward!"

"No; you know that I am not that. Have I not stood before his pistol without flinching? You have seen that."

"Then you refuse to do my bidding?"

"I cannot, in this."

"Then, out upon you! There are others who have not such fine scruples. But remember—you have denied me the first thing I ever asked!"

After what I have suffered through you, your refusal comes with an ill grace. But for your presence I might have won even now. Why are you here? Go! and never dare to obtrude yourself upon me again!"

She turned with royal scorn.

The Frisco Sharp detained her, as abject a suppliant as she had been to that other.

"Stop! stop!" he cried. "Anything but his life. Put my love to the test; but not that. You know why I cannot strike. Anything short of that."

She turned, and faced him again.

"I have it!" she cried; and now her face was terrible in its smile of exultant malignity. "I have it! I have it!"

She struck her hands together, and laughed aloud. Her eyes gleamed with merciless cruelty.

"You shall drop a rarer morsel on my palate than his death! Anything but that, you said. I will take you at your word. I had almost forgotten the other part of my revenge. She must be crushed! Death! death! She shall live! Ha! ha! Death brings peace. Only life can protract undying anguish!"

"Come! come!" she cried, suddenly, seizing him by the shoulder, as if eager to lose no time in putting her scheme into execution. "I can tell you as we go along."

Yielding to her impetuosity, the Frisco Sharp was at once fascinated and repelled by her heartless malignity, her almost ferocious exultation.

"What is she meditating against Lillian Amberleigh?" he asked himself, and his heart sunk with the thought that he was to be made the instrument of her revenge.

"Live? Yes, she shall live!" declared the excited woman. "She has robbed me of all my soul craved, and left me a life of despair. I will repay her in kind. She shall live to pray for the death that is denied her! I have seen her. I have read her nature. She is high-minded; she is sensitive to a degree. She is one of all others to writhe beneath the torture that I shall put upon her—through you! Ha! ha! My revenge will strike him deeper than a hundred deaths! He has dared to love her! Well, the dearer she is to him, the more will it wring his heart!"

Jules St. Auburn could endure no more.

"What is it you require of me?" he asked.

"What do I require?" repeated Mrs. Seaford, stopping and drawing a deep breath, so that her body seemed to dilate, gathering its forces to launch forth her purpose of hate! "This—that you crush her beneath a mountain of shame! Go! desolate all that is beautiful; desecrate all that is sacred; leave despair and self-loathing in the place of hope and happiness, until she shudders at the sight of man and doubts the justice of God! That is my revenge!"

Her eyes glittered; her cheeks flamed; her white teeth gleamed. She looked like a beautiful fiend!

The Frisco Sharp drew back in horror.

"My God!" he cried. "Do you know what you are asking?"

"Do I know? Do I not know? I am asking heaven for myself and hell for her I hate more bitterly than death!"

"Stop! stop! you cannot be a woman and meditate such cruelty against one of your own sex!"

"You mistake. I can—because I am a woman!"

"But—but—you cannot know—"

"But—but! Is this your pledge? You said anything but his life. I gave him life. Ha! ha! a generous concession! He will thank me, no doubt, when he comes to know. But away with obstacles! There is room for no 'buts' in the case. I demand unhesitating obedience to my will!"

"One moment. You do not know. She saved my life at the peril of her own. When I brought the scourge, and others fled, she nursed me day and night. Can I repay her devotion with such a blow as this? No! no! My God! you cannot ask this of me!"

The woman stood mute, wrestling with emotions that choked her. When she found voice, it was hoarse and low with intensity of passion.

"So you too love her?" she said.

Then she choked again, and she seemed about to spring upon and rend with her nails this man who had added the last straw of insult by going over to her rival.

"No," replied the Frisco Sharp. "I have but one love. But is it strange that I should hesitate to repay with such base treachery one to whom I owe so much of gratitude?"

"I grant you the argument. It is enough for me that you refuse."

And without looking at him, the woman turned and walked away.

In that he saw the death of his hopes. Could he give her up so? She was the only being he had ever craved. The very intensity of her passion, the greatness of her hate, fascinated him.

"Stop! stop!" he cried. "I cannot let you go like this."

The woman stopped, looked into his face, and laughed; then, without a word, walked on.

"If I consent?" he asked, still keeping pace with her.

At that she whirled round and clutched his arm, fiercely.

"If you consent!" she cried; but the rush of passion evoked by the contemplation of that contingency suffocated her, and she broke off.

"If I so renounce all manhood—if I sink my soul in infamy unparalleled—if I do this thing at which the vilest wretch in yonder camp would shudder, repaying such a debt in such a way—what will it profit me to be the instrument of your revenge?"

"If you consent," repeated the woman, her eyes glittering, her breast heaving—if you give to my soul this sweet morsel which I crave more than life, more than love!—when this is done come to me and ask anything in return!—anything!—anything!"

"Anything?" repeated the man, staggered by the hope that her words held forth.

"Yes! anything under Heaven!"

Jules St. Auburn could scarcely believe that that which he had always craved was at last within his very grasp.

"Do not trifle with me," he said, in a choking voice. "You know what I will ask."

"Yes! yes!" she replied, eagerly.

"And you will grant me this? Remember, you love—"

"I hate him!"

"But if I pay this price," said the Frisco Sharp, shuddering at the thought, "there must be no uncertainty about my recompense. Swear that you will fulfill your part of the agreement."

The woman laughed as she caught him by both arms.

"It will be unnecessary," she said. "My heart will keep me to the pledge. Do we not love those who bring us great happiness? Consent! consent! and you shall have an earnest of my love now!"

She shook him in her impatience, and seemed to need but a word to prompt her to embrace him.

The man grew giddy. He saw only the witching smile of the siren—her eyes beaming upon him as they had once before when they wooed him to madness in the past. He heard only her voice attuned to the cadences of tender importunity, as she reiterated:

"Consent! consent! consent!"

"God help me!" he muttered.

Then he caught her to his heart and covered her face with burning kisses.

"Promise! promise!" she urged, still withholding her lips from him.

"I do!" he replied. "I give my soul for your love!"

Then her arms closed about his neck, and her lips responded to his thirsting love.

"Go! go!" she said. "Let that be your inspiration!"

And with tender, pleading mercy driven from his heart by a savage, exultant passion, the man staggered blindly away on his iniquitous mission.

God help the innocent victim of this tigress's hate!

CHAPTER XXIV.

"HOW WILL IT END?"

So he who had scorned all fear now fled through the night like an arrant coward—fled without daring to look round! Ah! but there is that which cannot be met by hardihood. Fate had dealt him a blow which he could neither return nor withstand.

A ran he might meet with a man's weapons; but how still a woman's tongue?

Bella Seaford's beauty would win for her champions; and from them the innocent girl would meet the covert sneer, the thinly masked insolence which she would not understand at first, but which would rend her heart when she knew its significance. Their foul tongues would use her sacred name to joint the jest whose contact was like the touch of the tarantula.

The thought of this wrung Carleton's soul with anguish, while it roused all that was most terrible in his nature.

"One thing is inevitable!" he grated between his set teeth—"I shall have to weed out this town! And I'll do it, by the everliving God!"

But then he broke down utterly at the thought.

"All this will not save my darling one pang!" And the strong man was shaken by sobs.

Meanwhile the strange excitement that had swayed Lillian Amberleigh's heart had in a measure expended itself. Mrs. Seaford's visit, too, had been a diversion. It was an unusual break in the routine of her life; and the anticipated pleasure of detailing the incident to her guardian in some degree masked a strange nervousness with which she looked forward to his return.

When the clock struck nine she began to wonder at his delay. Ten found her pale with vague foreboding. Again and again she went out into the darkness, to look and listen. The voices of the night had never before so impressed her with a sense of solitude.

She could see the twinkling lights of the camp, and while she listened, the yell of some

miner who had "broke loose," came to her on the night wind. These tokens of man alone marred the awe-inspiring vastness of mountain and sky.

Eleven o'clock—twelve o'clock! The girl walked about incessantly, wringing her hands and sobbing with fear. A thousand terrible conjectures haunted her distraught brain.

In that wild country death by violence was a thing of daily occurrence, only borrowing interest from the standing of the man killed. Had those terrible men—She could not finish the question.

At last there came a footfall. She rushed out of the house, which she had entered scarcely a moment before. Then, for the first time in her life, she was appalled by the darkness. She could not see the person approaching. Her unstrung nerves thrilled with a sense of personal fear.

"Will! Will!" she called shrilly, like a frightened child.

"Lillie, it is I," came the assurance of the loved voice.

Then, with a cry that thrilled through and through him, she sprang forward, precipitating herself into his arms and hiding her face in his breast, there to sob hysterically and cling to him trembling, a creature formed for love and protection—than which, what could appeal more directly to his strong, chivalrous nature?

His arms closed about her. He was conscious of a wild defiance of earth and heaven to snatch her from him. It was a moment fraught with danger. Burning words of passion crowded to his lips with the mad impetuosity of ravenous wolves. Once they passed that barrier, they could never be recalled. Knowing what he knew, those words would be a more deadly wound, a more treacherous assault, than if he were to draw the bowie-knife from his belt and bury it to the hilt in her trusting bosom!

His fancy pictured her face—its wondering incredulity, its sorrowing, questioning reproach, when she should come to know the circumstances under which he had made the avowal of his love. He shrank shudderingly from the spectacle. It sobered him as nothing else could have done.

With a mighty effort he attuned his voice to such tenderness as he had a right to show her, and said:—

"My little darling! Has she worried over brother Will's absence?"

The words almost choked him. His soul rose in riotous rebellion. He was *not* her brother! He could not endure even this conventional use of the term.

Her reply showed that, if in the early part of the evening her virgin breast had been startled by the springing of a new vague consciousness, the anxieties of the later hours had again veiled it, at least for the time. She was his little sister Lillie, as she said:—

"Oh, where have you been? How could you leave me so? I have nearly died of fright. Oh! you are cruel—cruel!"

The man read the significance of that almost petulant cry, and with a strange mingling of gratitude and pain, said to his heart:—

"Thank God! I was mistaken. She, at least, will be spared this agony. That lightens my load by more than half."

And yet he could almost have wished that she had loved him—a little, only a little!—other than as a brother!

He stroked her hair with a fond, reverent touch, soothing her gently, but evading an explanation, until she importuned him directly.

"Where have you been all this time?" she asked, raising to his face with an injured air her eyes yet tear-wet, like flowers with the dew upon them.

A gentle gravity came into his face and voice, as he replied:—

"I have cares, dear, which I cannot share with you; but, believe me, I would not heedlessly cause you anxiety."

Quick remorse sprang up in her gentle heart.

"Oh, I know!" she cried, throwing her arms about him. "Forgive me; I have pained you."

Then a jealous impatience of this mysterious something which had ever stood between them seized her, and acting on the impulse, she appealed to him at once.

"But, Will, tell me! Why have you always kept it from me? Are you not sure of my love? Don't you want my sympathy? I have heard all about your meeting with—with the man they call the Frisco Sharp. There was a lady here, just after you went away. She came partly to thank you, and partly to make my acquaintance, as the only other woman in the camp, she said; and told me all about it. Oh, Will! you can't know how it has pained me to see you suffer and be unable to console you—not to dare to say a word for fear of wounding you—to know that there is something always between us, shutting me out from full sympathy with you! Don't think that I am a child any longer. Tell me all about it, won't you—won't you, Will?"

They were in the house now. The man was seated and the girl standing beside his chair. At her earnest appeal he broke down completely and bowed his head on the table. What she

said, all unconsciously, went home to him with such terrible force.

She was no longer a child. There was a heaven of delight and a hell of pain in the reflection. And, all how fatal was that something, which, she said, standing between them, caused her pain! Would it produce a keener pain if she knew?

The man was shaken with anguish that he could not subdue.

The girl was terrified. She had never seen him give way like this.

She flung her arms about his neck. She tried to raise his head upon her bosom. And her piteous quivering voice wailed:

"Will! Will! Oh! what have I done? Don't give way so! You frighten me! Oh, Will! Will! Will!"

She sunk upon her knees at his side and hid her face in her hands, distracted with pain and fear.

The man mastered himself with a superhuman effort. The sudden calm that his will imposed showed his great strength.

"Hush!" he said, lifting her up. "I have been miserably weak to give way like this in your presence. It is over now. See—I am composed."

"Yes, yes," she said, gazing into his face through her tears; "but, oh, Will! your calmness is almost as terrible as your emotion! I am half afraid of you, you look so strangely!"

And she clung to him very like a frightened child.

"There! there! dear," he said. "Trust me to tell you all that it is wise for you to know. It would be cruel to cloud your young life with shadows out of mine. And now you must calm yourself and go to rest."

She obeyed him, but plainly with an aching heart.

Carleton sought his own room, not to sleep, but to renew the battle; and through the silent watches of the night he asked himself the question:

"Where will it end?"

For two days he hovered near his darling. Then, as there was no open demonstration of hostility from her enemy, he began to think less of personal danger to her and more of the false position in which she stood.

This drove him to melancholy meditation in the mountain solitudes.

Ah! had he but known the fatal opportunity he was thus giving for a wrong of which he never dreamed.

But danger threatened him as well; for, while he wandered on the brink of a precipice, he detected a slight sound, and turned just in time to avoid a treacherous knife-thrust from one of two men who threw themselves upon him and bore him to the ground.

Taken unawares, he was struggling for his life against two determined foes! If he fell, who would protect his darling? That thought nerved his arm!

CHAPTER XXV.

WOMAN TO WOMAN.

THAT that of Jules St. Auburn, never was the least of man perturbed by a fiercer battle of conflicting emotions. After that mad moment when the warm kisses of the temptress drove every other thought, all ruth and all conscience, from his mind, he stood face to face with the enormity of the deed her jealous malice had asked of him.

Meanwhile, after two days of torturing suspense, a woman's impatience could endure no more, and Bella Seaford resolved to seek the Frisco Sharp and learn the reason of his inactivity.

As she expected, she found him skulking in the neighborhood of Lillian's home.

Another he might easily have eluded; but knowing that she came in quest of him, he discovered himself.

She was amazed at the change in him that those two days had made. He was haggard and wild-eyed. His voice sounded sepulchral, as he said:—

"You see how congenial a task you have given me. The devil of my nature is not so fully developed as you may have thought. But what with the liquor I have drank and the thoughts I have cultivated during these two days and nights of sleepless conflict, I am making rapid strides in the direction of utter ruthlessness, utter infamy!"

"Bah! Do you spend your time in moralizing? What have you done in these two days?"

"Nothing!"

"Nothing!"

"Utterly nothing!"

"Do you intend to do anything?"

"I intend to fulfill my engagement to the letter!"

"Have you lacked opportunity so far?"

"Not altogether."

"Then, what are you waiting for?"

"I am not yet quite brutalized, you see; I am yet haunted by the vision of this woman facing the plague for me, a stranger."

"Jules St. Auburn, you are trifling with me!"

"You will not say so to-morrow."

"To-morrow?"

"I shall have damned myself to all eternity by that time!"

"You have resolved to act—"

"To-night."

"Without fail?"

"Unless you relent in your purpose."

A wave of scorn and bitter hatred swept over the woman's face.

The man smiled cynically.

"I will relent—to-morrow!" she said, significantly. "Meanwhile, I have heard enough for to-day. I can now live on anticipation! You have provided me with the food I crave; I will return the compliment to-morrow!"

She bent a fascinating smile upon him.

In an instant he was at her feet. She extended both her hands. He clasped them and pressed them to his face and lips, while his whole form trembled.

A moment afterward she was gone. Now a wild elation took possession of her.

"To-morrow!—to-morrow!—to-morrow!" she kept repeating.

Then she was seized with a desire to see her victim and gloat over her by anticipation.

A little reconnaissance showed that Lillie was alone in her home. But a wistful sadness now seemed to brood over her. No more the tripping step, the blithesome voice raised in song. She was wondering at the change that had come over her guardian.

Seeing Mrs. Seaford approaching, she ran to meet her, with a cordial smile and both hands extended in welcome.

"Oh, Mrs. Seaford!" she cried, "I'm so glad you've come! Do you know? since your arrival I have just begun to realize the lonesomeness of being the only woman in camp."

"So! he has said nothing to her," mused the woman. "Well, I'll repair this omission!"

"Good-morning," she said, not seeming to notice Lillie's hands. "I do not see Mr. Carleton at the works, or here, at home."

"No," replied Lillie, somewhat chilled. "He has been very busy for two or three days. But won't you come in, and let me take your things?"

"Thank you, no. I have but a word to say," was the icy reply. "Miss Amberleigh, what do you know of Mr. Carleton?"

"What do I know of him?" repeated Lillie, in bewilderment.

"Yes. What do you know of him?"

There was evidently war in this short, sharp, crisp catechism. It was woman to woman. Though in most cases absurdly apprehensive of masculine wrath, the gentle creatures seldom stand very much in awe of each other. Lillian bridled instantly, at the first intimation of hostility toward her guardian.

"Madam," she said, with a hauteur strangely in contrast with her usual gentleness, "I do not understand you!"

"I will be more explicit, then. Do you know that Mr. Carleton is a married man?"

"A married man?" repeated poor Lillie, breathlessly.

She had never dreamed of such a thing.

"That he has basely abandoned his lawful wife?"

"Madam!"

"Do not 'Madam' me. Wait until I get through. If he has deceived you in this matter, you have no longer any excuse for being blind to the truth: for I am that wife!"

"You his wife? I don't believe you!" cried Lillie, stoutly.

But the fact was, she did believe; and her heart sunk like lead. Here was the secret of her guardian's only too apparent distress.

"You will have convincing evidence of the fact before many hours," said Mrs. Seaford.

"If it is true," pursued Lillie, "I have no doubt you gave him ample cause for separating from you."

"We will waive that for a moment, if you please, since your opinion, in your ignorance of facts, can have no basis save prejudice," said Mrs. Seaford, coolly, "and come to the consideration of your own position."

"My position, madam?"

"Exactly—a girl of your years the sole female inmate of a gentleman's home, unsanctioned by even the shadow of relationship."

Lillie shrunk back as if stung by this cruel insinuation.

"Have you any idea in what estimation you are held in this mining camp?" pursued Mrs. Seaford, with a woman's unsparing malice.

Lillie was breathless. She could but gaze with distended eyes.

"The morals of this rude community are very lax. Besides, fear of Mr. Carleton's resentment would deter these men from showing you any open disrespect. But there are certain laws of propriety that hold good the world over; and I can assure you that the general sentiment is that, if you are not Mr. Carleton's wife, you ought to be!"

Lillie shivered.

"Put it to a vote, and the unanimous opinion of this or any other community would be that no woman who had not lost all self-respect, all shame, could hold the position you now do."

Now the tortured girl rallied.

"Stop!" she cried. "You are stating what is

absolutely false! The men here are rough and unlettered, but many of them have instincts of manhood as true as you will find among the most cultured; and the respect which they accord is an acknowledgment of my true womanhood. They know me, and not one of them would believe in your jealous suspicions."

"Ah! indeed?" sneered the woman. "No doubt you have your favorites among them, ready to champion your cause, right or wrong. Women of your class generally do, I believe. But this as it may be, I denounce you as a shameless creature who has usurped my place; and I warn you that I mean to oust you from it, in spite of your brazen impudence!"

But it was not in Lillian Amberleigh's gentle nature to do battle with such a woman as this. An assault on one that she loved would have fired her to valiant retort; but this personal attack, and of such a character, wounded her so deeply that she could not find words for reply.

With a hysterical choking in her throat, while she struggled to keep back the tears that sprang to her eyes, she said, hoarsely:—

"Go! go! Perhaps some time you will know how deeply you have wronged me, and be sorry for it!"

"Out upon you, you—you—creature!" cried Mrs. Seaford. "Dare you order me away from my own husband's door? If it were not for sullying my hands on a wretch so vile, so abandoned, as you, I would eject you physically, myself! As it is, I will leave you in your shame! But do not think that I will rest under this outrage. If there is a spark of manhood in this camp, I will have you mobbed and driven with hoots and jeers from this roof, and from the place!"

The infuriate woman took her departure.

The girl, completely crushed, sunk upon the floor, sobbing and moaning as if her heart would break. How long she lay thus, she knew not; but at last she was aroused by a footstep, and started up in wild fear.

Were they coming?

CHAPTER XXVI.

A READY TOOL.

BUT it was not an enemy that Lillian Amberleigh had to meet. It was only faithful Tom O'Connor.

"Oh, Tom! Tom!" she cried, seizing both his hands.

"Arrah, Miss Lillie!" cried the honest Celt, much moved by her distress. "Is it tears, I dunno, that I'm seein' in yer bright eyes? Bad luck till the day! phat will be the matther wid ye at all, at all?"

"Tom, have you seen Mr. Carleton?"

"Not the blessed day, Miss Lillie."

"He's not at the works?"

"Div—Barrin' yer priseness! No."

"Can you find him?"

"Well, ma'am, I kin throy—no less!"

"Go, at-once! And toll him to return home immediately. Or, wait. I will give you a note to deliver."

She wrote a hasty line, summoning her guardian to her side.

"Make every effort to find him, Tom; for it is very important that he should get this note."

"Don't ye worry, Miss Lillie! Faith, av he's above ground, meself's the b'y that'll scare 'um up in no time fur ye!"

And Tom O'Connor set out with all expedition.

"What will be the matther, I dunno?" mused he. "Faith, the colleen wouldn't be croying fur nothing. Bad luck till the wan that brought that tear till her eye! It's a God's blessing av there don't be a funeral-whin Musther Carleton hears of that same!"

But, having sent her messenger, Lillie was disturbed by a new perplexity. How could she explain her fears to her guardian? Such violence had been done to her feelings that it seemed as if she could never again look him in the face. Now she buried her crimson face in her hands, and wept again in inexpressible bitterness and humiliation.

As she cooled off Mrs. Seaford began to see that feminine spite had carried her to a length that might prove prejudicial to her scheme of revenge.

"I am afraid that I have done a very foolish thing," she mused. "I have awakened her baby fears; and they will now be on their guard. Of course, he will use every precaution to guard her against my malice!"

The woman ground her teeth in jealous rage.

"Why could I not restrain my tongue, and leave them in their false security? Ah! but I have given her a foretaste of the misery that awaits her! How she writhed! That was lotus to my revenge!"

But here her evil meditations were interrupted by a voice.

"Beggin' yer pardon, ma'am!"

Mrs. Seaford stopped with a start.

Before her stood a villainous-looking ruffian as she had ever seen. But he stood hat in hand, with the outward sign of respect; therefore she had as yet no cause to fear him.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Mose Finley," was the reply

"And what do you want?"

"To serve you, ma'am."

"To serve me?"

"Waal, ye see, ma'am, I happened to be within earshot o' the shebang run by the Gentleman from Pike, jest now; an' I overheard what you was sayin' to the Angel."

"Well, what if you did?" asked Mrs. Seaford, a little aggressively. "Do you mean to take her part against me?"

"Not muchly!—ef the court knows herself!" said the big ruffian with an ugly scowl.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs. Seaford, beginning to apprehend the situation. "What then?"

"Waal, ye see, ma'am, I bain't no friend to the Gentleman from Pike, no way ye kin fix it! He played it mighty low down on this hyar camp when it sported the handle o' Hard Luck, as may be unbeknownst to ye, ma'am, bein's as how ye're fresh in these parts."

"You mean in the matter of the Frisco Sharp?"

"Ma'am, you kin take my left every time! I didn't know that you held the bower. It air fur that little dodge o' the Frisco Sharp."

"Well, what of it?" asked Mrs. Seaford, waiting for this man to "show his hand."

"Waal, ye see, ma'am, I thought that you mought have a grudge ag'in' the Gentleman from Pike; an' ef so be ye want to git squar' with him, Mose Finley's yer man, every time."

So the tempter brought the opportunity to Bella Seaford's hand. She hated the man she had loved until now. Here was a man who had none of Jules St. Auburn's scruples, come to her in the nick of time. She feared that her indiscreet outbreak to Lillian Amberleigh might frustrate her whole scheme of revenge. Suppose she could by the means of this ruffian remove the Gentleman from Pike before he had an opportunity to protect the woman he loved!

A wicked gleam came into her eyes. Her resolve was taken instantly.

"Have you the courage and address to act at once and effectively?" she asked.

Mose Finley looked puzzled.

"Beggin' yer pardon, ma'am, ef so be you'd run them keards over ag'in, an' run 'em slow. Ye see, I don't jest drop to ye."

"I want no bungling in this case," explained Mrs. Seaford. "What is done must be done at once—this afternoon; and it must be so well done that there will be nothing left for to-morrow. Do you understand?"

"Hum! I savvy! It's drop on him, an' douse his glim! That suits yer humble sarvent!"

"Do you know where to find him? Can you do this without discovery?"

"Waal, ye see, ma'am, havin' a little somethin' standin' ag'in' him on my own account, I've kept one eye on him, an' I reckon I'm jest the man what's got the pins sot up to bowl him out on a ten-strike."

"Can you do this alone?" asked Mrs. Seaford, who had to guess at the substance of Mose Finley's peculiarly metaphorical discourse.

"I know whar I kin put my finger on the man that kin back me."

"All this will cost money, of course. How much?"

"I leave that to your generosity, ma'am."

"Will a hundred dollars buy your man?"

"Waal, I should smile!" said big Mose Finley, with a grin.

"I beg your pardon, sir!" said Mrs. Seaford, with a sudden assumption of queenly dignity.

She would tolerate no undue familiarity from the tool she purchased.

"That makes my head swim! She's the devil an' all!" reflected the ruffian.

Then he said, respectfully:

"Beggin' your pardon, ma'am! A hundred dollars will set the ball a-rollin', all O. K. Ef I don't bag the game, I won't come back on ye fer no more."

She gave him the money; and after a few more directions he took his departure.

Bella Seaford then walked on, with her white teeth set, her eyes gleaming as cruel as the grave.

"Death to him, and undying shame to her!" she muttered. "But if her fall were assured, I'd let him live to enjoy it!"

After that the day waned, until just in the evening gloaming Lillie heard a footstep approaching. She stood with downcast eyes and cheeks aflame, trembling. How could she face him?

The man stopped in the doorway, without a word.

The girl looked up to see what was the matter.

Before her stood, not the one she had expected with such conflicting emotions, but the Frisco Sharp!

He was ghastly pale. His eyes were blood-shot and gleaming with a look that terrified her.

"You here?" she cried, with her heart fluttering in her throat.

"Yes, I," replied the Frisco Sharp in a voice that augmented her fears.

"You must know your danger. Why did you come?"

"I came," replied the man, in hollow tones, "to bring hell to you and to myself!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DESPERATE FIGHT FOR LIFE!

"OVER the cliff wid 'um! Over the cliff wid 'um! That's our little ga-ame!"

"Stow yer—chin music—curse ye!—an' pile in—hyar—an' help!"

Colorado!—the wonder country of the New World!

In the Heart of the Sierras!—the Back-bone of the Continent!

Canyons, cleft down! down! to the very foundations of the earth, whose murky depths never know the glad sunshine!

Giant cliffs, soaring high up into cloud-land, until the beholder turns giddy, and his heart quails with an unreasoning dread of their toppling crests!

On the very verge of a beetling cliff two men are engaged in mortal combat, rolling over and over each other, their legs and arms writhing like interlocked serpents; their thaws and sinews fairly cracking with the fierce tension to which they are subjected.

One is a young man, with a face purple with mighty exertion, and foul with blood and dirt. He fights with set teeth, as grim and silent as death.

The other is perhaps a few years older, though still in the prime of life and strength.

He is larger of frame, and of coarser make.

His features, where they are visible through his tangled beard, are bestial in the extreme.

He growls and snarls in his rage, like a wild beast, alternately cursing his antagonist and making equally profane appeals for assistance to another, who is evidently his colleague.

The third party in this life and death struggle is a son of Erin, as his speech has already betrayed.

Hovering about the contestants on the ground, yet ever with a due regard for his own safety, he tries to get in a blow when opportunity offers, or help his pal to any other advantage.

"That's right!" he shouts. "Now, over wid 'um! Take that, ye dirty blaggard!"

But, in the confusion of limbs and rapid shifting of bodies, his lusty blow finds the wrong man, as a howl of pain and rage from his colleague attests.

"Curse your—stupidi—ty! Who are—you backin'?" he gasped, as he could fetch breath. "Pile in hyar! Pile in—hyar!—you in—fernal coyote!"

"Yis! yis! mahn, dear! Faith! I'm wid ye! But, phat wid airrums an' lega flyin' this way an' that, bad luck to the sowl o' me feet! but, as me name is Mickey Flannigan, I'm bothered inthoirely to tell the wan from the other o' ye!"

"Take hold of him—blast ye! Will ye let him—throw me over the—cliff?"

"Yah!" with a savage snarl at his foe. "Cur-r-se your—infer-nal—"

But his breath was cut off, as the iron grip of his silent antagonist closed like a vise on his throat.

"Tha-ur, Mose, me darlint! Now I have 'um be the fut! Role 'um over, mahn, till we pitch 'um over the cliff to the rocks belo-ow! Och, murder! will ye be 'asy?—ye devil! Sorra leg will he have an 'um at all! He kicks aqual to a—Oh!—Och!—Bad—Ugh!"

But the speaker lay all in a heap on the ground, writhing in agony.

A well-directed kick in the pit of the stomach had effectually knocked the wind and "chin music" out of him together.

With his tongue protruding and his eyes distended with agonized fear lest death should claim him before he could recover breath, he rolled over and over on the ground, his hands clasped over his stomach, and on his face a look of piteous appeal which would have been ludicrous but for the tragic gravity of the situation.

And now, while he lay *hors de combat*, the fierce struggle went on between those other two.

Both fought silently now—one with that iron stillness which had characterized him from the first, and one because of that grip which hooped his throat like triple bands of steel!

Now the awful terror of the scene rose higher and higher.

The bull-dog pertinacity of the man who never relaxed his hold, but struggled on, waiting patiently, mutely for the coming of that suffocation which crept forward slowly, surely, with the flight of every second of time—ever nearer! nearer!—and certain in the end to sap the strength of his adversary, was a thing, in itself to freeze the blood with a horror unspeakable!

And to him who, tear as he might—fiercely! wildly!—frantically!—at that inexorable grip, could never—never loose one jot of its crushing pressure into his aching throat—ah! to him! how on the wings of the wind must have come that fatal weakness!—that swooning of the muscles that had never failed his will till now!—that slipping of the world from his feet!—that fading out of the brightness of the blessed sunlight!—that settling down of the dread, chill shadow of death!

Now he stands in the very presence of the Grim Destroyer!

Now he struggles in his very embrace!

His tongue, swelled and black, lolls from his gaping mouth!

His face—now crimson!—now purple!—now black with suffocation!—ridged with veins that seem distended almost to bursting!—is distorted by a grimace of agony and horror rivaling the dread visage of the fabled Gorgon of old, the sight of which froze the beholder to stone!

And oh! the ghastly spectacle of those eyes, bursting from their sockets!

Sickening!—appalled!—we tear our shuddering vision from the fascinating horror!

It is over at last!

The limbs no longer toss!

Even that spasmodic quiver has left them!

They lie still and rigid in never-waking death!

The survivor rises to his feet, and, while his broad breast lifts and falls in deep respiration beneath his folded arms, gazes gloomily down upon his ghastly work.

Now for the first time his stern lips relax their iron set.

"There lies a man—a fiend rather!—whose murderous soul is steeped in the blood of half a dozen butchered victims! No fault of his that he did not add another to the accursed list by this villainous assault upon me, laying in ambush and striking me from behind! Surely his punishment is just!

"But I must learn the cause of this attempt on my life. These wretches were the hands, not the head, of that damnable plot."

And he turned toward his other assailant, who now squat, staring, his face livid, his eyes distended, his teeth chattering, every fiber of his body quivering with fear—fascinated—awed—not daring to move, lest he might attract to his quailing person the wrath of that grim avenger!

Cringing to the earth beneath the stern eye of the man in whose attempted assassination he had just taken so inefficient a part, and with unmanly tears in his eyes, Mickey Flannigan sniveled his piteous plea.

"Och, Musther Poike!—plase, yer honor!—doan't make me luck loike yan omadhaunt!—saints defend us! Aw, surr!—for the swate love o' God!—you'll not do it!

"Aw, surr! ye'll spare me!—I know ye will! Take counsel o' yer better falin's! Blessed be God! yer that generous an' that hoigh-spirited ye'd not demane yerself to be wantin' the blood av wan ye'd despoise as the ground under yer fate!

"Spa-ur me the loife, yer honor, that's no good to yerself, at all, at all; an', be the sowl o' me body it's full an' free confission I'll be makin' o' the damon that timpied me an' Mose Finley till the murderous dade!"

"Who tempted you?"

"Sure, wasn't it Mose that came to me, an'—D'ye moind," says he, "tha-ur's twinty dollars in the job fur yez, av ye're at all handy," says he."

"And you would murder a man for twenty dollars?—*wretch!*" thundered the Gentleman from Pike, with a stamp of furious indignation, and a black menace of the brows and lightning gleam of the eyes that gave him the terrible aspect of an angry god.

"*Holy Mother d'find us!*" fairly yelled the luckless wight who had precipitated upon himself this avalanche of wrath. "Aw, yer honor!—*de-ar, swate Musther Poike!—aw, surr!—indeed, surr!—be all the saints! an' be all the sacramints!* I did not know that it was yerself, yer honor, whin I engaged—bad luck till the day! Phat will I say to yez?"

And the pitiful knave fairly sobbed with excess of terror.

"Bah!" sneered the Gentleman from Pike. "Why am I angered by such a paltry—*animal!*"

Seeing the storm past, Mickey recovered sufficiently to mutter to himself:

"Divil snap the unlucky tongue o' me! I could pull it out be the roots, I'm that vexed wid it! Phat for was I afther telling him that, I dunno?"

"Go on!" commanded the Gentleman from Pike. "What did yonder dead dog tell you of his employer?"

"An' ye'll not be afther taking vingeance on me, yer honor, av I'll tell yez? Be gorra! It's a clane brist—"

"What, bound! do you think I would make terms with such a villainous wretch as you? I promise you nothing! Go on; or I will find means to loosen your tongue!"

"Yis, yer honor! yis! Faith, I'll not cross yes by so much as a breath! Ye see, yer honor, Mose came to me an' says he:

"Can ye stand at me back loike a thue man, Mickey Flannigan!" say he.

"Faith I can," says I.

"It's a matter av twinty dollars to yez, man, av yer at all handy," says he.

"It is?" says I.

"No less," says he.

"Sure, twinty dollars is twinty dollars, these haired toimes," says I. "Phat will I do fur it?"

"There's manny a poor devil that 'ud be better off, av he'd only consint to it, when he was put out av his misery he-ar, an' well staired fur a better worruld," says Mose, wid a wink.

"Sorra doubt," said I.

"Would yez scruple, Mickey, I dunno," says

he 'to sind a conthrary wan to glory, av his friends thought it advisable, an' for his rael good?"

"Phat's that ye're talkin' about, Andy?" says I, crossin' meself.

"Twinty dollars!" says he, puttin' his finger ferminst his nose.

"It's a hangin' matter," says I.

"Twinty dollars!" says he.

"The Vigilantes is hereabout," says I.

"Twinty dollars!" says he.

"Faith! it's dead broke I am," says I.

"Twinty dollars!" says he.

"An' niver a morsel to ate, nor a sup to dhrink this four-an'-twinty hours," says I.

"Twinty dollars!" says he.

"Go away, man!" says I. "Do yez take me fur a murderer!—howly saints defend us!"

"Twinty dollars!" says he.

"Don't timp me," says I.

"Twinty dollars!" says he.

"Whin will we do it?" says I.

"Now ye're talkin'," says he. "The first chance we git."

"Wha-ur?" says I. "Not in the camp?"

"Divil a taste, me b'y!" says he. "I know a thrick worth two av that, anny day."

"Wha-ur thin?" says I.

"Among the crags," says he. "Wha-ur ilse?"

"Wha-ur nobody will be afther spyin' us?" says I.

"Thru fur you, man de-ar," says he. "Divil a sowl!"

"Who is it?" says I.

"I'll point 'um out to yez fast enough," says he.

"An', be me sowl, yer honor! that's ivery worruld he towld me. Faith! I had no more idee it was yerself—"

"But your employer?" interrupted the Gentleman from Pike impatiently.

"I'm coming to that, surr. Faith! he-ur's the Lord's blissed truth, just!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BY THE HAIR OF HIS HEAD.

"WELL, surr," pursued Mickey, I axed 'um—'Who's wantin' it?' says I.

"Be this an' be that! but it's inquisitive ye are, Mickey Flannigan," says he. "But I don't moind tellin' yez, bein' as ye're an owld fri'nd."

"Who is it, thin, alana?" says I.

"Would yez belave it?" says he—a woman!"

"A woman?" says I. "Sure, they're at the bottom av all divilment!"

"It's no lie ye're tellin'," says he.

"But phat woman in the woide worruld is this?" says I.

"Arrah, thin, ye divil's limb! Will yez niver have done vexin' me wid yer questions?" says he.

"An' ye'll not be tellin' me?" says I.

"Divil a taste!" says he. "Faith! that's my sacret. This much ye know, an' that's enough fur yez—her name is Misthress Twinty Dollars!" says he.

"An' sorra word more, yer honor, do I know about the matter, at all, at all."

"A despicable tool, ready to the hand of any scheming brain!" was the muttered comment on Mickey Flannigan's account of his temptation and fall.

Then paying no further heed to him, the Gentleman from Pike turned on his heel, and, passing the dead body of the would-be assassin without so much as a glance, walked to the very verge of the precipice, where he stood and gazed down into the gloomy depths of the canyon with its bed of jagged rocks a thousand feet below!

Even the giddy hight from which he gazed could not phase his clear, strong brain.

"There is where they would have cast me," he mused—"nay, where *she* would have hurled me, to lie a broken and mangled thing!—food for wolves and vultures!"

Out of the very brow of the cliff and overhanging the awful abyss, its roots struck deep into a fissure in the rock, grew a young pine whose bole was perhaps less than a foot in diameter.

Carleton examined it, then pushed it—at first with his foot; afterward with his shoulder, with all his might.

It stood almost as firm as the rock from which it grew.

"That will answer my purpose," he mused. "Now for a slight lesson to as cowardly a rascal as ever lent himself to the schemes of abler villainy."

And he returned to Mickey Flannigan who, not daring to move from his crouching posture, had watched this strange procedure with eyes distending wider and wider with undefined horror.

What mysterious peril threatened him?

"Aw! Master Poike, surr, phat are ye goin' to do, I dunno? I've towld yer honor ivery thing thruly—be me sowl, I have!" cried Mickey Flannigan, in terror and despair.

"Stand up!" commanded Carleton, sternly.

"Yis, surr! yis!" cried Mickey, trying to

placate the man he feared by prompt obedience.

"Oh, surr! phat are ye goin' to do wid me?"

Paying no heed to his anxious inquiry, Carleton looked the man over critically.

Let us follow his example.

Mickey Flannigan was rather small in stature and slight of build, standing not more than five feet four, and weighing perhaps a hundred and thirty-five pounds.

Beginning at the top, he was thatched with an abundant shock of coarse, straight hair, a compromise between red and yellow.

Next, his face was thickly covered with great brown freckles, interspersed with gray patches which looked as if the outer skin had peeled off.

In matters of dress, Mickey was not "proud," a "fakir" cap; a red flannel shirt, patched "wid any thing at all that came handy," brown breeches, sustained by a bit of rope tied about the waist, and stogie boots, as tough as burr-oak and as hard as horn, comprising his notions of a comfortable and serviceable toilet.

By the way, where the mountain clay was rubbed off one could yet detect traces of lime on those ancient boots; for, "in the States" Mickey had carried the "bricks an' morthar" to the top av a foive-shtory house, d'ye moind, while the man above—bad luck to 'um!—did all the work!

"And such a creature as this might have hurled me to my death!" mused the Gentleman from Pike, with rising indignation, as he gazed at the trembling wretch.

"Turn your back to me!" he commanded, sharply.

In an agony of fear at not being permitted to see the unknown danger that threatened him, Mickey began to pant:

"Oh, surr,—oh, surr!—"

A gleam of lightning shot into Carleton's eyes; he took a single step forward, and put his hand on the butt of a pistol.

Plainly, he was not accustomed to repeating his commands.

"Yis, surr!—yis, surr!"

And Mickey went round the quickest he had ever done in his life.

"Cross your hands behind your back!"

"Yis, surr!—yis, surr!"—complying with nervous precipitancy.

With his bowie-knife the Gentleman from Pike cut the rope that bound Mickey's breeches at the waist, and with it proceeded to bind his hands.

Then came a hellowing wail of agonized terror.

"Och, Musther Poike!—*de-ar, swate Musther Poike!*—it's not hangin' me to yon three ye'd be doin'? Aw, surr! phat will I say to yez? Och, murder! that iver I lived to see this day! Shoot me, surr!—kill me inthoicely, be-ar, an this blissed spot!—but *doan't* l'ave me hangin' to the three, surr, a thousand fate from the ground!—doan't do that wicked thing, surr! Phat av the rope would break!—oh, wha-ur would I go! Spare me this, surr, an' the blissed Lord will reward yez!"

Heedless, unmoved, implacable as a Nemesis, the Gentleman from Pike proceeded calmly with his work.

When it was done, his hand fell upon Mickey's shoulder with an iron grip, and his stern, cold voice commanded:—

"March!"

Mickey felt that hand whirl him round, then urge him toward the brink of the precipice.

One stare at the yawning abyss!—one glance around, as if for succor or escape!—one look into the face of his iron judge!—and with a yell of despair that made the rocks around ring again, his knees that long had smote together now refusing utterly their support, he fell to the ground, appealing, in a wild jumble of invocation, to all of the saints for protection, since his most piteous prayers had failed to move the mercy of this implacable avenger.

As coldly indifferent as if a human being were not being tortured almost to frenzy under his hand, the Gentleman from Pike transferred his grip from Mickey's shoulder to his shock of coarse hair, and, without a word, began to drag him toward the brow of the cliff.

Here was the terrible element in this man's iron nature—that, having decided to act, he moved forward in the direct line of his purpose, never wavering, never pausing, but taking each successive step with the steady precision and irresistibility of an insensate machine.

Shriek after shriek rent the air from Mickey Flannigan's now foaming lips; but planting his feet firmly and throwing his left arm about the trunk of the pine which we have described, the Gentleman from Pike coolly swung the quivering, frantic wretch clear of the cliff, and held him suspended over that sheer descent—that awful gulf!—of a thousand feet of intangible air!

While being dragged over the ground, Mickey had struggled like a maniac.

Now he became suddenly still.

An awful hush had fallen upon voice and action.

Only an involuntary shudder now and then ran through his frame.

His teeth were clenched.

His eyes were wide—staring—glassy.

The man was frozen with horror!

A moment before, the crags had shivered and shuddered with blood-curdling sounds, as if haunted by a legion of shrieking fiends of despair; now, far down the canyon, the echoes waned fainter and fainter, as if the uncanny things had taken their flight, back to the gloomy caverns of the abyss which prisoned them from the light of day!

Then, when the stillness became almost tangible, as if shuddering nature held her breath in the presence of an impending tragedy, Carleton's voice, deep and solemn as that of some dread oracle, fell upon the dull ear of his now scarce conscious victim.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DEADLY PERIL.

ALTHOUGH she did not understand his words, there was something so reckless in the aspect of the Frisco Sharp that Lillian Amberleigh shrunk from him in terror.

"I want no outcry," he said, shutting the door and putting his back against it. "Do you see this?"

And he drew a bowie-knife from his belt and tried its edge on his thumb nail.

The girl gazed at the glittering steel as if fascinated.

"One cry for help, and I will cut your tongue from your throat!"

As he gazed at the trembling girl with blood-shot eyes, he looked fully capable of carrying out his horrible threat. He had drunk just enough liquor to make him thoroughly devilish.

As he advanced toward her, Lillian sprang to the other side of the table which stood in the middle of the room.

"Stop! stop!" she cried. "Why have you come to molest me? I who never did you anything but good!"

"I come at the instigation of a woman," he replied, cynically. "No man would ever dream of such fiend's work. But a woman's jealousy is equal to anything. 'Bury my rival beneath a mountain of shame!' said this angelic creature; and I am here to carry out her will. Come! resistance is useless. Prepare for your doom!"

But the affrighted girl dodged back and forth about the table, as he tried to get to her.

"Oh! you cannot be so cruel!" she cried. "You are beside yourself. You do not remember that it was I who saved your life."

"Yes, I remember all that. Did I not say that I was bringing hell to you and to myself?"

"But you will not! Oh! you are not so wicked! Why should you wish to lend yourself to the revenge of that terrible woman? Have I not greater claim upon your mercy? Did I watch over you through the horrors of the plague for nothing? What can this wickedness profit?"

"Enough! enough! curse you!"

And wrought to fury, he began to push the table toward the wall, so that it would no longer furnish her with a means of eluding his grasp.

"Oh! Spare me!" cried the distracted girl.

"Help! Help! Oh! Oh! O—oh!"

Shrill rose her screams, as she felt his iron grip on her wrist. She threw herself upon her knees, and still pleaded with him in a torrent of wild words.

With a savage oath he pressed his hand over her mouth, stifling her cries, and lifted her in his arms.

Then, after a moment of frenzied, ineffectual struggle, she fainted.

Now she lay all helpless in his power!

He placed her on the rude settle which stood against the wall.

She might have been asleep—nay, dead!—she lay so white and still.

With her face so like marble in its pallor, the wonderful perfectness of feature stood out like fine chiseling, until she resembled a beautiful piece of sculpture.

Withal there was something infinitely piteous in that still face!

The man stood and gazed upon her; and gradually the ferocity died out of his face, to give place to a great sadness and remorse.

"Is it not enough," said he, "that my base treachery blighted the flower of his life? And she—so pure, so innocent, so beautiful!—must I do this hideous thing?"

He shuddered at the thought.

"I am not all devil," he pursued. "Only a fiend could tempt me to such hellish work. And yet I love her! Can I spare this spotless child, and lose her in consequence?"

He stood perfectly still and silent after that question. In that moment all that was good in this man's nature was brought face to face with all that was selfish and evil. Would the good angel win?

"Can I lose her I love?" he repeated. "No! no!—a thousand times, no!" Then this girl must be sacrificed?

Again he paused; and she who was so completely in his power appealed to him only by her helplessness, her purity.

The man trembled from head to foot. Great beads of icy sweat stood on his forehead. His features worked spasmodically. He wrung his

hands and struck them together in that fierce travail of the spirit.

"Oh! I cannot look at her!" he cried, with agony in his voice. "That piteous face would move a very devil to mercy!"

And striding to the table, he fiercely struck his hand down upon the candle, extinguishing it and leaving the room in utter darkness.

There was the sound of his footsteps recrossing the floor, then a long silence, during which all nature seemed to wait, shuddering, breathless.

At last the dead stillness of that darkened room was broken by a sound of sobbing, and a voice cried:

"My God! I cannot! I cannot! I cannot!"

And there, with no eye to see him, the Frisco Sharp was kneeling beside that still, unconscious form. A woman's purity had won!

Presently he arose, stirred with a fever of excitement.

"She must be satisfied with something less!" he cried. "Even a jealous woman cannot be utterly ruthless in her hatred. I will separate them. He will suffer torture unspeakable never knowing what nameless calamity has befallen her. She too will suffer, being torn from him. But not this thing!—not this damnable iniquity!"

He struck a match. The candle he had utterly demolished in extinguishing it. By the light of matches, then, he took a coverlet from an adjoining bed-chamber, and wrapped the unconscious girl in it from head to foot, then lifted her in his arms and bore her from the house and away in the darkness.

A moment later he reappeared in the roadway on horseback with Lillian Amberleigh held before him.

Then from up the gulch came a cry which had thrilled more hearts than one with superstitious dread.

The Frisco Sharp was a man of intelligence, yet thoroughly imbued with a gambler's superstitions, which prepared him, without exactly sharing the vulgar belief of the ignorant miners, to view this mystery with shuddering dread.

He now found himself in the dilemma of having to face the Ghost of the Canyon, or to dash through the mining camp before that terrible cry brought the revelers from the saloons to throng the street along which he must ride.

His choice of the latter alternative was instantaneous; and putting spurs to his horse, he swept down upon the camp.

Then out from the darkness came that awful something, its coronet of serpents hissing and dashing forth their forked tongues, its eyes blazing, its boar-like tusks gleaming white in the gloom, and flecks of foam flying from its champing jaws, while its terrible voice filled the mountain pocket with shuddering echoes.

Evidently it was in pursuit of the flying horseman; but if it overtook him, what could save his innocent burden from its rage?

Alas! she was beset on all sides!

CHAPTER XXX.

THE UNDELIVERED MESSAGE.

"Michael Flannigan!" said the Gentleman from Pike—and the mere employment of the proper form of his name, which Mickey could not remember having ever heard, save from the lips of a priest, was, in itself, terribly impressive—"Michael Flannigan, do you realize that only my will stands between you and an awful death? A moment ago you had it in your heart to hurl me down!—down!—down!—to the jagged rocks ten hundred feet below! Now I have but to open my hand, and—"

A pause, more terrible than putting the awful horror into words.

"Michael Flannigan, shall I open my hand? Shall I mete out to you what you designed for me?"

But the tongue of the wretch was paralyzed; he could not reply.

"Listen, Michael Flannigan. On one condition will I spare your life."

Ah! was there a hope?

A slight quiver, running through the frame of the man suspended between life and death, showed that he heard and understood, and how eagerly he grasped at this straw.

"Swear to me—Stop! Oaths are nothing to such a wretch as you. I will only charge you with my will, and then release you, without any promise—with nothing to bind you save your fears, which the recollection of this moment, I feel assured, will never let sleep.

"Remember, then, this:

"If ever you break the commands I now lay upon you,—living or dead, I will hunt you to the ends of the earth, drag you to this spot, tie you as I have tied you now, and drop you from the base of this tree—down!—down!—down!—into the black hell that now yawns beneath you!"

A spasmodic quiver showed how deeply this terrible threat struck root into the superstitious nature of the helpless listener.

"Living or dead!" he had said; and Mickey Flannigan believed that, living or dead, he would surely fulfill his vow.

"Now listen well to what I say.

"By attempting my assassination, without

the slightest shadow of provocation, you have forfeited your life to me. I now hold that forfeit in my hand. Of my own free will, I can claim it, or let it go. In the case of your villainous accomplice, I took what belonged to me. He lies dead within reach of my hand! To you I give back that to which you have no right, except as coming from me. You will continue, as before, to walk among living men! But understand—I only lend you this life, which is mine, of right, to do as I please with it—I lend it to you to use as I shall command! From this time forth you are mine!—body and soul! Beware that you do nothing to offend me; for, when it pleases me, I shall take back what I now lend!

"Come! stand upon your feet!"

When Mickey again stood on *terra firma* with his hands unbound, he pulled the forelock of the scurrying top which had stood him in such good stead during his awful peril, and said, somewhat tremulously:

"Musther Pike, I thank ye, surr, kindly fur the loife ye spared to me, whin, had ye been so minded, ye could as 'asy have fixed me loike Mose th'ur—only worse!"—with a shudder. "May God nake it up to yez, surr, whin you stand i' nadel Manewhoile, to show yez that I appreciate the generous dade ye've done this day, I'll tell yer honor the name o' yer inimy, that yiz may guard ag'n the future."

"But I thought you did not know her?"

"Did I tell yez that, yer honor?"

The "ruling spirit" would crop out instinctively.

Already Mickey's face took on the demure questioning peculiar to his nation under like circumstances.

"Certainly you told me so," replied Carleton, amused, in spite of the gravity of the situation, by this touch of his born nature.

"Well, yer honor, after being so generous the day, ye'll not grudge to forgive me that. I must 'a' told to yez, surr!"

"I think it probable you did."

"But, Musther Pike—plaze, yer honor—ye'll see that I've repented, and am doing better now. Faith! whoy ilse would I say any thing about it, but I'm m'aning to serve yer honor?"

"True enough. Well, her name is—"

"Mistress Sayford!"

A shudder ran through the frame of the Gentleman from Pike, and he answered not a word.

A moment later there came the sound of hurrying feet; and a man, breathless with running, burst into view around the angle of an adjacent crag.

At a glance the new-comer took in the whole situation.

"An' is it yerself, Musther Carleton?" he asked, respectfully, yet gazing wonderingly from the living to the ghastly dead. "Sure, comin' up the gully beyant, I heard yells that would I thought there was n'urther doin.' But, Howly Mother! y'at's all this, surr?"

"How do you do, O'Connor?" said the Gentleman from Pike, extending his hand cordially. "You are just too late to witness an attempt at assassination."

"Phat, surr? To murther you?"

"Yes."

"Mose Finley did it? Faith! ye've ch'sted the hangman, yer honor. It was too good fur 'um to die the hard av a real gentleman."

"An' plaze ye din' hear, Mickey Flannigan? Whoy do yez look so downcast, n'at? Had you a hand in this devil's worrukt?—ye n'urtherin' laggard!"

"Did he, in dade, surr?"—turning to the Gentleman from Pike.

But the latter seemed absorbed in gloomy introspection, and heeded not, if he heard the question.

Mickey was about to slink off, when O'Connor's hand fell detainingly on his shoulder.

"Tell me, main—was it you? An' it was your cowardly voice I heard—now I know it."

"Take yer hand off me, O'Connor!" said Mickey, sullenly. "Sure I've done nothin' to the loikes of you. Let me go, I say! It's not in you to gaisay Musther Carleton's own words."

"An' did he give yez l'ave to go?"

"Faith, he did."

"An' do yez intend to l'ave 'um go, loike this, yer honor—scot free?" cried O'Connor, indignant and incredulous.

"Let him go," said the Gentleman from Pike.

"Well, Mickey Flannigan, I'll say this:—tha-ur's not another mahn that generous in all the Rocky Mountains! Oh! shame fur yez, mahn, that ye'd iver consent to n'urther wan that does only good to iv'rybody that comes his way. I'll wager that ye've 'aten the bread that his money put into yer mouth, whin many av us would 'a' starved to death last winter, but fur him. Oh, mahn! ye're a disgrace to yer kind! Ould Ireland, that has cradled as brave min and thrue as iver died ten'ath the heel av the oppressor, would disown the loikes av you!"

What a contrast was presented between those two!—one glowering with sullen, hang-dog

ferocity, and one with erect figure, and frank, open face glowing with honest indignation.

"Howld on, Tom O'Connor!" growled Mickey; "ye're crowdin' me too hard, mahn! I'll have yez go 'sasy, now; but I'll be aven wid yez, yet, fur this."

"Don't ye minace me, Flannigan, or I'll have not a whole bone in yer cowardly skin! Since Musther Carleton has said it, go!—an' the devil go wid yez! Tha-ur's wan to remember an honest man by!"

And he delivered a tremendous kick in the rear which shot Mickey forward like a stone hurled from a catapult.

The discomfited villain turned and shook his fist at the man who had put upon him so well-merited an indignity; but, not heeding him, O'Connor turned to address Carleton.

The man had disappeared!

"Och! but I must deliver me missage!" muttered O'Connor, drawing the note from his pocket.

But, though he ran in the direction he supposed the Gentleman from Pike had taken, he failed to find him.

Then he called him again and again, making the rocks ring with his name; but his shouts died away among the echoing rocks, and no response came back.

Forced at last to abandon the search as hopeless, the honest Celt concluded that it would be wisest to return to her who had sent him and report his misadventure.

But ere he reached the camp his heart was turned to ice by a cry so terrible that wild beasts fled before it.

"The Ghost o' the Canyon!" muttered O'Connor, and he shrunk cowering to the ground.

But the voice receded, and at last he plucked up courage to baste on.

A few minutes brought him in sight of the cabin where he had left Lillian Amberleigh.

Beyond, through the darkness, he could see lights gleaming in the mining camp, and shadowy forms hurrying to and fro, while from before the Metropolitan came the sound of excited voices.

Breathlessly the Irishman ran to the cabin. He gained the threshold. The door stood wide. The house was untenanted.

"Howly Saints defend the colleen!" he cried, crossing himself, while his hair seemed to rise on end; "the Ghost o' the Canyon has made way wid her!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

BELLA SEAFORD TRIUMPHS.

On the wings of the wind flew the Frisco Sharp down the deserted street, and was lost in the darkness beyond before the "hells" began to disgorge throngs of excited men.

The abductor was perceived by no one; but some of the foremost were just in time to catch a glimpse of a dread monster which had coursed through the camp almost at his heels, filling the air with those blood-curdling cries.

"Gents," said Moxy, solemnly, "that thar ain't the sign o' no good luck for this hyar camp—ye hyear me?"

The miners stood in the middle of the street and gazed into the darkness where the monster had disappeared, and slowly shook their heads in an awed silence.

A window in the second story of the Metropolitan was raised, and Mrs. Seaford's head thrust forth.

"What was that, gentlemen?" she asked, her voice shaken with the trepidation of fear.

"The Ghost, ma'am," replied Moxy.

"The Ghost?"

But, before he had time to explain, a halloo was heard from the direction of the Angel Works, and a man was seen running forward at the top of his speed.

"The Gentleman from Pike!" exclaimed Judge Wiggins. "There's something wrong up there!"

"No," said Moxy—"it's Tom O'Connor."

"Och, murder, b'ys! cried the Celt, coming up breathlessly, "phat will we do! Bad luck to this day, but the Ghost o' the Canyon has made way wid the Angel o' this camp, intirely!"

"What's that?" cried Judge Wiggins.

"Pon me sowl, there's niver a wan in the house! Wasn't it Miss Lillie that sint me afther the Gentleman from Poike, that worried that she couldn't restrain the tears from her swate eyes? An' wha-ur did I find 'um but on the bluff beyant, jist afther fur bein' murderd by Mose Finley and Mickey Flannigan, the—"

"What's that? The Gentleman from Pike murdered?" chorused several of the crowd, gathering about O'Connor excitedly.

"Be 'asy, me darlint!—as the pin says to Teddy Maglody, whin he set down on it unawares. Wud the likes o' thim spalpeens shtand up ag'in a man loike the Gentleman from Poike? Bad scan to them! wasn't it Mose Finley that lay stone dead, an' Mickey Flannigan yellin' bloody murder? Faith, tha-ur's the devil now! Did he have a hand in sperritin' off Miss Lillie, I dunno?"

As Mickey, pale with fear, crept forward to learn the cause of the excitement, the crowd

pounced upon him, and with furious oaths and the brandishing of weapons, demanded Lillian Amberleigh.

In vain he protested his innocence. His attempt against her guardian's life told against him. In a twinkling the excited men had a rope about his neck, and were dragging him toward the cabin.

While they were there a man strode among them, with stern brow and face now pale with apprehension.

"What is the meaning of this? What is the matter? Has anything happened to—"

But the name died on his lips. The Gentleman from Pike swept every one from his path and strode into the house, swinging wide the doors and examining its four rooms with the rapidity of a whirlwind.

Then he turned upon the crowd a face terrible to look upon in its anguish and stern menace.

"Speak! speak!" he cried, in a choking voice. "What has happened? Where is Miss Amberleigh?"

In a few words he was put in possession of all the known facts, by Judge Wiggins. Then he looked over the crowd with despair and angry impatience in his eyes, as he noted the look of superstitious awe on every face.

"Men, he cried, "this Ghost of the Canyon is all bosh, as far as anything supernatural is concerned. I tell you it is some man who has his own ends to accomplish. Suppose some one has found a rich strike, and has taken this means of frightening others away, while he coins his millions? I dare hunt this thing, whatever it is, to its lair. How many of you dare follow me?"

The wily suggestion of wealth out of which they might be tricked inflamed the avarice of the crowd. But Tom O'Connor, from pure courage and love for the abducted girl, cried:—

"Count on me fur wan! I'll folly yez to the devil an' back!"

"I want ten men, to whom I will guarantee a hundred dollars each in any event, and five hundred when we recover the lady," said the Gentleman from Pike, who knew the weight of a certainty.

Instantly the crowd was at his disposal. From them he picked ten in whose courage he felt that he could rely in any ordinary case. Then, without deigning a glance at the shivering wretch whom the crowd still held, he strode from their midst, straight toward the Metropolitan Hotel.

There was but one guest chamber of any pretensions, and, assuming that Mrs. Seaford would occupy this, he went directly to it, and entered without the ceremony of knocking.

The lady, standing in the middle of the room, received him with disdain and defiance. She began:—

"You seem to have forgotten the courtesy—"

But the Gentleman from Pike interrupted her sternly.

"I am in no humor for trifling," he said, struggling hard to control the passion that prompted him to annihilate this woman at a stroke. "You see that your vile emissaries have failed in their attempt on my life. With a defenseless woman they have been more successful. Tell me who they are, and what they have done with her."

"You are talking in riddles, sir. By what right do you accuse me—"

"Stop!" cried the Gentleman from Pike, growing fairly purple with suppressed rage. "One word of equivocation or evasion will make me forget that you are a woman! Were you a man, I should have strangled you to death without a word. As it is, I almost question your claims upon my forbearance. But we are wasting time! Speak! Where is the girl you have caused to be abducted?"

A wicked smile of triumph lighted Mrs. Seaford's face.

"Find her!" she cried, defiantly.

"Woman! woman! do not try me too far!" cried the Gentleman from Pike, seizing her wrist.

"Unhand me, you ruffian!" cried Mrs. Seaford. "Oh! your manhood has improved strangely by association with this creature! How dare you come to me from such a vile—"

With a savage cry, this man who had been wronged and outraged beyond endurance, and now saw her he loved better than himself threatened by a nameless peril, while the perpetrator of the wrong not only gloried in her wickedness and defied him, but vilified her innocent victim—with a savage cry he caught the woman by the throat. But before his fingers closed upon her delicate flesh, he remembered himself, and released her.

Not at all hurt, but cowed for an instant by the fury to which her insolence had wrought the man, Mrs. Seaford stood speechless.

Before she had time to recover herself, the Gentleman from Pike had turned and rushed from the room. He could not trust himself there.

As he emerged from the hotel he saw the form of Mickey Flannigan dangling at the end of a rope and writhing in mid-air, surrounded by a hooting mob. So utter was his contempt for

this cowardly wretch that he heeded him no more than if he had been a dog. While he disdained to strike him himself, he would not raise a finger to prolong his worthless life.

"Men!" he cried, in ringing tones, "prepare torches, and begin the search at once!"

Ten minutes later the camp was ablaze with light. Meanwhile it was discovered that Mose Finley was the only man missing from camp. This quickened the superstitions of the men. Who then but the Ghost of the Canyon could have carried the girl off?

But the Gentleman from Pike called attention to the fact that a horse had preceded the mysterious apparition; and, diligent search discovered the place where a horse had been tied not far from the cabin.

With this beginning they commenced the search, but lost the trail on the rocky ground before they had followed it half a mile.

When the morning dawned, and they were no nearer success than when they set out, the Gentleman from Pike realized that he had a difficult and uncertain task before him.

His agony was beyond words. There was no violent outward manifestation. He seemed turned to stone. Only his eyes glittered with something akin to insanity.

But if he writhed with pain at the uncertainty of Lillian Amberleigh's fate, his heart glowed like molten iron with hatred of the woman who had twice blighted his life.

"I will wring the secret from her if I have to resort to torture!" he cried in his agony. "By heaven she shall yield! Is the mere fact of her womanhood sufficient to give her immunity in crime? No! no! My darling shall not be sacrificed to her jealous hatred!"

But when he sought her he found that she had fled in the night. An attempt to follow her, on which great hope was built at the outset, proved as fruitless as the previous search.

Then, when he stood face to face with despair, the Gentleman from Pike and his party came upon the strangest spectacle they ever witnessed, except only the Ghost of the Canyon. Indeed, at first sight, the miners were terrified, thinking that they had come at last upon the great mystery in broad daylight, and one cried:

"Good God! thar's the Ghost!—two of 'em, fur rocks! Scatter, gent!—scatter!"

"Stop!" thundered the Gentleman from Pike, drawing a revolver. "The first man who attempts to run will be dropped in his tracks! Now let us see what this is that everybody fears so much."

CHAPTER XXXII.

CALLED TO ACCOUNT.

THE sun beats warm and bright down into a canyon cut in the solid rock by the corroding floods of a thousand years. The red-stained rock, the green pines, the misty waterfalls, are all familiar to the eye. But in the bottom of the pass are moving two objects well calculated to fill the beholder with amazement, even in that country of marvels.

They are a man and woman—but such a man and woman!

The former is tall and muscular, with the bearing of a king. His deeply-bronzed face is molded into features of remarkable strength and nobility. His eyes are keen and restless, as from a life of ceaseless vigilance. His long, flowing beard and hair give him an air of wild majesty.

His apparel is of undressed bearskin, and of the most primitive fashion. His arms consist of a bow and arrows, a rude mace formed of a rock fastened to a handle with the sinews of some animal, a hatchet of flint, a sort of pike or javelin, and a knife or dagger made from a bone.

The woman is remarkable for great delicacy of feature and exquisite symmetry of form. Her hair, also long and flowing, would be the envy of a Metropolitan belle. But on her beautiful face rests the pathos of a great sorrow.

She is appareled in the skin of the mountain goat, dressed to a snowy whiteness, and fashioned into garments of strange beauty. At her back she carries a low and quiver, a slender, flint-headed lance in her hand, and in her girdle a bone poniard.

It is as if this strange pair had been translated from the stone age into this modern day.

The man speaks, and in English.

"Courage! courage, dear friend. Have we waited during ten years of hopeless inactivity, to faint now at the very threshold of our undertaking?"

"Yes, I know," replied a sweet, piteous voice. "But the world seems so big. I never realized it until now. Am I ungrateful? But I have suffered—oh! I have suffered so long!"

Tears sprang to the eyes of the man at the utter desolation of that cry.

"Hush! hush!" he admonished, gently. "Let us not doubt God's wisdom or goodness. In His own time and way be sure that He will work the greatest good of his creatures."

The woman only sobbed:

"My little darling!—my baby!—my lost, lost treasure!—where are you?—oh! where are you, in all this great, cold world!"

What love is like mother-love?—what constancy so defies time and circumstance?

The man gazed at the woman, and over his soul swept a great reverence, a profound pity, a tenderness beyond words!

"Ten long years!—ten unending ages of separation!" wailed the woman. "She would not know me! The mother who bore her, who nurtured her at her breast, who has wearied heaven with unavailing tears and prayers that her heart might be gladdened by one more look, one more smile, one more caress this side the grave, would be to her a stranger! Oh! can a merciful Father so crown the miseries of my wretched life? What have I done?"

"Madoline! Madoline!"

"Oh! I know what you would say. But have you a mother's heart? And have I not been patient? Ten years of living death! Oh, Hugh!"

What could he say? The man was mute.

And all about them towered giant peaks that bespoke the power of God; at their feet sprang the delicate floweret, protected from the rude mountain blast by His love; and over all the calm, blue sky proclaimed His peace!

Perhaps something in nature appealed to the sore heart of the mother; for her plaint ceased, and she walked on in silence.

They had proceeded thus for some time, when the woman suddenly stopped, and, paling, cried:

"Hark!"

The man thrust his javelin into a crevice in the rock, and unslinging his bow, longer than himself, and fitting an arrow to the string, stood at bay.

In this country danger might lurk behind any crag. Constant vigilance was the price of life and liberty!

"There are several approaching," whispered the woman. "Shall we fly before we are discovered?"

"Without knowing whether we are fleeing friend or foe?" replied the man. "No. We must risk something. Let us wait."

The hollow canyon in which they rode vibrated with the clang of steel on rock. A moment later quite a cavalcade appeared down the tortuous vista of the crags.

"They are whites!" cried the man.

"Thank God!" aspirated the woman.

The horsemen drew rein, evidently apprehensive of this strange pair.

Only a moment. Then their leader rode boldly forth.

A glance showed the Gentleman from Pike that this pair, as strange as they appeared, had nothing in common with the Ghost of the Canyon; and he approached them with a look of intense curiosity.

At sight of him the fear passed from the woman's face to give place to a look of burning questioning. As he drew near all consciousness save of that face left her. The fierce struggle between a wild hope and a shivering, fearful incredulity bereft her of speech, and almost of respiration.

She could but gaze, with her dazed soul in her eyes, until he reached her very side. Then, with a shriek of delirious exultation, she sprang forward and clutched him with her clinging hands—with those mother-hands that prized him and would not let him go, until he had delivered up her lost treasure!

How she sobbed!—how she laughed!—how she choked with emotion that stifled speech!—how the holy tears rained from the eyes that devoured him with questioning that her lips refused to frame!

In open-mouthed wonder the miners gathered round and stared.

Bewildered by this strange greeting from a total stranger, the Gentleman from Pike could only stammer:

"Madam!—my dear madam!"

"Hugh! Hugh!" cried the lady, finding her voice and turning to her escort, who had followed her, at first in alarm, then in wonder, then in excitement second only to her own. "Oh! Hugh! It is he!—it is he! Thank God!—thank God!"

She choked. She seemed about to faint from excess of joy.

In a dazed sort of way the Gentleman from Pike had the presence of mind to slip from his saddle to the ground and support her.

"My child! My child! Where is my child?" she gasped, still clinging to him.

"Your child?" he repeated, as if he scarcely comprehended her.

"Yes! Yes! I gave her to you!—ten years ago!—when the flood threatened us all with destruction! You rode away with her—my baby! You are here!—alive!—well! You must have saved her. Give her back to me! What have you done with her? Where is she?"

"And are you that mother?" asked the Gentleman from Pike, with unutterable pity and unutterable pain in his voice, gazing at her with humid eyes, and prolonging her suspense with unconscious cruelty.

"Am I that mother?" repeated the woman, interpreting his words too literally. "Yes! yes! Oh! you cannot doubt it! Look at me!

There must be some familiar feature—some resemblance that will link me to my child."

She held up her face for inspection, gazing into his eyes with a wild appeal, as if her soul hung upon his decision. Her frame quivered, and her breath came in panting gasps.

Who could gaze unmoved upon such a spectacle? Who could look into those hungering mother-eyes and tell her the terrible truth? Would not she fall dead at his feet?

An agony that transcended speech swept over the man, and he stood mute!

Those who were with him gazed one upon another, and their bronzed faces paled, and their rugged frames shook. What was this terrible tragedy that they were looking upon? He whom nothing had ever daunted before now stood unnerved, unmanned.

Into the face of the lady's escort came a terrible fear. He advanced and put his arm about her, as if to protect or support her, gazing the while almost fiercely at the man of whom she had demanded an account of his stewardship of her child, as at one who was about to deal her a death-blow.

This fear had not yet put its icy hand on the woman's heart. She saw only a man whose dull faculties she had failed to quicken.

"Hugh, speak to him—convince him!" she gasped, in a fainting appeal to her escort.

And he, understanding aright the man's hesitation, said in a deep voice, veined with dread:

"I am Hugh Gunnison, captain of the wagon-train wrecked near this spot ten years ago. This is Mrs. Amberleigh, who gave you her child when you rode down upon us with warning."

"Yes!—I gave her into your very hand!" cried the mother. "Tell me—where is she?"

And the man, constrained at last by her wild passion, said, with hanging head, not looking at her:—

"I would give my life to know!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A BITTER ALTERNATIVE.

WHATEVER the nature of the Ghost of the Canyon, it was hampered by human limitations; for the horse of the Frisco Sharp outstripped it in speed, and, if it sought to follow his trail, it lost it in the darkness.

After several miles of hard riding over a way that was full of difficulties even by daylight, the abductor let his jaded animal drop into a walk, while he began to cast about as to what was best next to do.

It did not take him long to realize that, having carried this girl off under the impulse of a blind passion, he was now in a dilemma what to do with her.

The indispensable prerequisites were shelter, food, and security from both escape and discovery. These could be easily secured for a short time; but what he had not forecast was the necessity of acting as her jailer for an indefinite period in the future.

What ultimate disposal could be made of her? He could not remain her perpetual jailer; for, even if so wild a scheme were practicable, it would cut him off from his reward. But the moment she was free from restraint she would reject her guardian.

Mrs. Seaford would never accept so uncertain a substitute for her heartless purpose.

But the need which lay nearest was a place of hiding; and he took the unconscious girl to a cave with which he was familiar.

Here, by the light of a pine knot stuck into a crevice in the rocky wall, he regarded her for some time in gloomy thought before making any effort to revive her. At last, frightened by her prolonged deathlike pallor and immobility, he began to work over her with nervous solicitude.

The moment she showed signs of returning animation, he arose and retired a step.

Ah! how terrible was that awakening!—alone in a gloomy cavern, filled with shadows, rather than light, by the smoking torch, and standing near the man, terror of whom had thrown her into that deathlike swoon!

The girl started to her feet, wild-eyed and panting; then shrunk cowering into an angle in the cavern wall, and stared at him her teeth chattering—a poor creature frantic with fear.

The Frisco Sharp shuddered.

"Don't look at me like that," he said. "You need not fear me. I will not harm you."

"Oh! what have you done?" she cried. "Why have you brought me to this terrible place?"

"Because I was not quite devil enough to carry out a woman's fiendish barbarity! No—not even when my heart's desire was held forth as the bribe! See!—you owe me something of gratitude for the measure of my cruelty to you. In sparing you, I fear that I am throwing away my only hope."

Her eyes wandered from his face, in furtive glances cast about into the heavy shadows, as if in quest of some avenue of escape.

"Do not waste strength in a hopeless attempt at flight," said the Frisco Sharp. "Do you think that I would incur all this risk, and then let you slip through my fingers? No; you shall never leave this place alive, unless, indeed, I

conclude to carry out your enemy's infamous purpose. I may be driven to it in the end. For how can I hope to keep you always a captive? Then, too, she may not be satisfied with this scheme. The malignancy of a jealous woman is not easily appeased."

The Frisco Sharp seemed to be working out the question in his own thoughts, rather than explaining the situation to the shivering girl. His eyes were fixed upon her with that unwinking stare noticeable when the thoughts are turned within.

"Oh! how can you be so cruel?" cried Lilian.

"How can I be so cruel? I will tell you the whole story, and then you will understand."

"Years ago I met Mrs. Seaford, then the bride, just over her honeymoon, of the man known to you as William Carleton. You have seen her. From what she is now, judge of her when perhaps a year or two older than you are. She was the belle of any circle which she chose to honor. Men flattered her by their devotion, women by their ill concealed envy. Was it a wonder that she should be a coquette?—that after her marriage she should regret her old triumphs?"

"William Seaford—that is his true name—was a man of high ideals. He attached great value to womanly delicacy. He reprehended his wife's levity. But he believed that it was only superficial. He would have trusted her with his life—nay, more than that, he did trust her blindly with his honor."

"He also he trusted, almost as implicitly, I believe. When business called him away from home, he laughingly left his wife in my charge."

"We were thrown upon each other for entertainment every day, and all day. We rode and boated, read and sung together. At noon-day and in the treacherous moonlight, we were ever side by side."

"Had I been as honorable as her husband thought me, I would have gone away; for every look I bent upon her was a betrayal of his trust. As for the wife, she saw my homage, and led me on by the subtlest arts."

"No doubt at the outset she meant to keep me suspended between heaven and hell, while she carefully adjusted the barrier of propriety between us so that I could never overstep it to compromise her or myself. But she was playing with fire; and in the end she lost that perfect control which she had confidently expected to hold over herself."

"I do not think that she loved me. But my boundless adoration flattered her vanity. From excusing my love and refusing to look upon it as dishonorable to her and myself alike, she came to revel in her power, and, at last, to pity my misery; so that when I cast honor and loyalty to the winds, and fell at her feet, the intensity of my passion overpowered her, and she was swept away in that mighty rush of emotion."

"I do not say that she would not have recovered herself before it was too late. I think probably she would. But fate denied her the opportunity."

"Concluding his business earlier than he expected, her husband determined to give her a pleasant surprise. My God! what a home-coming! He came upon us in the moonlit garden. She lay unresisting in my arms, while I poured forth my burning passion in insane speech, and rained kisses upon her upturned face and lips."

"I discovered him first. I shall never forget his look. It froze me to ice."

"I never heard such a cry as came from his lips. It roused his faithless wife, and she tore herself from my embrace just in time to see him level a pistol at my heart."

"Perhaps you can interpret the womanly instinct that prompted her. She sprang before me and received the bullet in her own body."

"When he saw her fall and lie motionless and bleeding, it unnerved him. The pistol fell from his hand. For a moment he stood gazing at her like a maniac. Then he turned and fled."

"I know now that he thought he had killed her. He was not undeceived until three days ago, when he met her and spurned her repentance and protestations of love."

"It was in the moment when he discovered his love for you. Her appearance crushed him. I think that the knowledge that her blood was not on his soul brought little relief to him, involving, as it did, a barrier that would separate him from you. She read all this in his horrified repulse of her."

"Now you know the mad jealousy which gave birth to her fiendish scheme to crush her rival. I was to be the instrument. And what do you think was to be my reward? All that I crave—herself!"

"This is what I am foregoing for the sake, not so much of what I owe you, but of your innocence and purity. Again, I say, you owe me something of gratitude!"

"Oh! but you will foster these higher, better inspirations!" cried Lilian, with clasped hands and supplicating eyes. "Such wickedness could never bring you happiness. The unceasing reproof of conscience would embitter anything you might gain. Give up this terrible scheme. Release me, and I will never betray you. I will bind myself by any engagement you see

fit to impose. I will promise anything—anything!”

The Frisco Sharp walked the floor of the cavern in moody thought.

The girl exhausted every ground of appeal, until she crouched there, sobbing in utter wretchedness and despair.

Suddenly the man stopped before her, exclaiming:

“I have an idea! Will you promise me this? Swear that, if I release you unharmed, you will go away and never attempt to see William Carleton again—never let him know what has become of you!”

The girl had risen to her knees with a wild hope. But at the thought of never again seeing the man she loved—ay, she did love him!—she shrank back with a thrill of nameless dread.

The thought so suddenly conceived thrilled the Frisco Sharp with a wild hope. Here was a solution of his difficulties. She should herself maintain the barrier between her and the Gentleman from Pike!

Carried away with this idea, he sprung upon her, clutching her by the shoulders, as if but awaiting her refusal to dash her to the ground, and crying, wildly:

“Swear! Swear! What do you lose? Nothing! Is he not already debarred from you? Swear, I say! or accept your doom, now, without an instant's delay!”

His words were true. That woman stood an impassable barrier between them. Poor Lilian, with honor and at least peace in one side of the scale, and only the poor privilege of seeing him she loved, while knowing that they must ever walk apart, in the other, gasped:

“Yes! yes! I promise you!”

“Enough! Enough! The bargain but waits Mrs. Seaford's assent; and she must accord it! I will leave you now, and return in ten or twelve hours, at furthest. You will be without food or water; but here are figs in abundance. You will at least have light.”

He hurried from the cavern, blocking up the narrow entrance with boulders, in such a way that they could not be removed from within.

Lilian Amberleigh was alone with her wretchedness and that uncertain hope contingent on a jealous woman's caprice!

There was but one bright spot to contemplate—the Gentleman from Pike had spurned his false wife for love of her!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A STRANGE EXILE.

“I WOULD give my life to know!”

Into those low-spoken words the Gentleman from Pike threw all the passion of his great love, his great despair.

Then dead silence fell!

The clasp of those mother-hands fell away from his arm. The woman shrank from him with slowly distending eyes, slowly whitening face.

At last came the hoarse whisper:

“What! what! You do not know?”

“Alas, no!”

She stood gazing at him with a great horror in her eyes. What was this terrible thing he had said?

She pulled at her hands with a piteous tearing motion, while she whispered to herself:

“He does not know! He does not know!”

Then, wringing her hands and trembling, she began to wail and moan, every quivering exhalation rending the hearts of all that heard her, while her eyes, brimming over with tears, were fixed upon the Gentleman from Pike in agonized appeal and wondering reproach.

He, airily and beneath an insupportable burden of pain, dared not raise his eyes to her face.

She looked piteously at the others.

Strong men all, yet helpless here!

Dizzily she turned toward the man on whom she had learned to lean in every emergency during that eventful ten years, gazing now into his eyes with a dumb despair.

He opened his arms and clasped her close upon his breast. He had no words of consolation. Can speech reach the heights of rapture or the depths of despair?

She shivered as with a sudden icy chill. With her lips at his ear, she aspirated in a hoarse whisper:—

“Lost! Lost! Lost!”

And he of whom she had demanded that which he had not to give, covered his face with his hands and groaned aloud!

For a time Mrs. Amberleigh's despair was insupportable. Then when she was calm enough to listen, came a story of intrigue and cruelty which filled her with horror.

“But,” concluded he who had held his trust securely for ten years only to lose it on the very eve of his calling to account, “while life lasts I will seek her, and, when found, avenge her!”

A rumble of indorsement rose from the lips of his followers. Weapons were grasped and bows bent with vindictive wrath.

“Let us lose no time, but proceed in our search,” said the Gentleman from Pike, who since Lilian's disappearance had been a prey to

uncontrollable restlessness. “Men, have we not horses—?”

But before the words were out of his mouth, every horse in the party was at the service of their strangely-met guests.

“I thank you,” said Capt. Gunnison to the men; “but I have so long depended solely upon the means of locomotion which nature provides, that I should feel strange in the saddle.”

But the Gentleman from Pike, with the courtesy which he showed to all women, but with a reverence and tenderness which set the mother of his darling apart from all others, adjusted his stirrup, and placed Mrs. Amberleigh in his own saddle.

Then the party once more advanced, the commander walking beside his guest.

“There is one complication in this case,” pursued the Gentleman from Pike, “which I cannot wholly ignore, though my reason prevents me from falling into the popular prejudice. Of course its connection with the case in which we are most vitally concerned is purely accidental; and yet it has a weird interest of its own. Who or what is this mysterious Ghost of the Canyon? Excuse me; but your strange appearance leads me to think it possible that you may be able to throw some light on the subject.”

And the Gentleman from Pike looked suspiciously at Capt. Gunnison.

“Has this man been masquerading all these years?” he asked himself, “and frightening these credulous miners? There may be a rich mine back of this mystery, after all!”

He forgot that, when he first saw the Ghost of the Canyon, Capt. Gunnison had just entered the country at the head of an emigrant train.

At mention of the mountain mystery, Mrs. Amberleigh uttered a suppressed murmur of fear, and involuntarily drew nearer to Capt. Gunnison.

The latter did not wholly repress a shudder. A look of deep gravity came over his face, as he replied:—

“What I have to say on that subject, I will, if you please, reserve for your private ear.”

“It is natural,” he pursued, looking about on the miners, who had never for a moment ceased to regard him and his companion with open-mouthed wonder and perhaps a shade of distrust, “that my strange appearance and long sequestration from my fellow-men should excite curiosity; and perhaps some explanation is due to the world. Without going into minute details at present, I will say that the disaster which befell my wagon train ten years since is doubtless known to most of you.”

“After the subsidence of the flood, I awoke from a swoon, to find myself surrounded by darkness, and menaced by a pack of ravenous mountain wolves. My first thought was of the lady whom I had attempted to save from the torrent, and I conceived a bewildered notion of driving the wolves back and searching for her. Indeed, I entered upon the struggle, using a wolf, which I swung by the hind legs, as a club with which to beat off his fellows. But as my faculties cleared—which took but a moment—I saw the hopelessness of such an undertaking in the darkness, I having no idea where her body might be, even if she were yet alive; and I then sought to escape with my own life.”

“I might not have succeeded, but for the number of dead bodies of men and animals lying about, which detained the beasts of prey. As it was, I escaped through the only opening in their ranks; and at last, became conscious that I was following a being of some sort, which emitted cries even more terrible than those of the wolves.”

“But I caught the flutter of what seemed to be a woman's garments, and conceived a half-delirious idea that Mrs. Amberleigh was being borne away by the creature, whatever it might be.”

“I then bounded in pursuit at the top of my speed, calling after it to stop. But it ran as fleet as a deer, never looking round, if indeed it heard my voice.”

“How far we ran up the canyon I do not know; but excitement sustained me long after I would otherwise have dropped with exhaustion.”

“At last the creature stopped before the mouth of a cave, which was so hidden among the crags that it might be passed and repassed a hundred times unobserved, unless one fell upon it by accident, or were led there by one knowing the way.”

“Then I rushed up and seized it, determined to contest to the death the possession of the unconscious lady it held in its clutches.”

“Gentlemen, in the darkness I seized hold of the body of a wriggling serpent!”

At this point Mrs. Amberleigh covered her face with her hands, with an audible shudder of unspeakable horror and loathing.

Captain Gunnison gazed upon her with a look of sad tenderness and pity. Seen thus, his rugged face took on a beauty of beneficence that at once drew the Gentleman from Pike to him.

“He will be a worthy father and protector for my darling, when we have found her,” he reflected, sadly. “Alas! my efforts to protect

her will now make her position only the more embarrassing.”

But Captain Gunnison had resumed his narrative.

“Before I had time to even let go the loathsome body, the snake sprung a coil about my wrist. At the same instant the monster, whose body seemed loaded with reptiles, dropped his unconscious burden, and assailed me with the fury of a demon.”

“From that moment I knew nothing, until several days later, when I awoke to consciousness, to find Mrs. Amberleigh nursing me back to life. My body was fearfully bruised and lacerated; and I had nearly bled to death. To her tender ministrations I owe my life!”

Upon the woman he bent a look, not so much of gratitude, as of deep reverential love. But lack of it lay a great sadness, blended with a pity so tender, so wistful, that it seemed as if tears lay just beneath his eyelids.

The woman turned her eyes upon his. In their depths lay a great gratitude, a great trust, a great love, but also an ineffable sadness, a piteous questioning and wonder, a longing that seemed half reproachful of him and half reproachful of self. Her eyes glistened with the tears that no stern self-control held in check.

“I but returned that which you had already given to me,” she said, in low, sweet tones, her voice vibrant with a profound tenderness.

Capt. Gunnison sighed, seemed to force his gaze from hers with an effort, and then walked on in silence, his eyes on the ground, his grand face shaded with the gloom of sadness too deep for words. The man was evidently struggling with emotions which a weaker nature could never experience, nor even appreciate.

“A life tragedy!” reflected the Gentleman from Pike, who had heard from Lilian Amberleigh all that the child knew of her mother's history—only the woman's brooding sorrow, and the absence of the husband and father, whom the child never remembered to have seen; but enough to prepare him in a measure for the interpretation of this situation, which he alone of the listening miners perceived. “It is plain that they love each other with a love which comes only to natures of his strength and her tenderness. What, then, has kept them apart all these years? For they are apart—I can see that plainly enough. It is the conscientious recognition and respecting of this barrier that makes their unhappiness. What is it? Not constancy to her husband; for she loves this man. Is it an overstraining of scrupulousness, because she has never received positive proof of her husband's death?”

It might be this; for she was a woman whose face, amid its patient suffering, bore the impress of goodness and purity—a woman whom the Gentleman from Pike, with a glow at his heart, thought worthy to be the mother of his lost darling!

But Capt. Gunnison was again speaking.

“I found that we were in a valley, shut in from the rest of the world by inaccessible peaks. For ten years I have wrought to effect our escape from that prison! Last night our deliverance was effected. We met you. You know the rest.”

The wonder of Capt. Gunnison's auditors was only increased by this strange story.

The Gentleman from Pike now turned with curiosity to learn that confidence which the strangely exiled man had promised him touching the Ghost of the Canyon. Who, what, was this mysterious monster, and what agency had he—or it—had in slitting this man and woman up from the world for a decade?

“Shall we go in advance?” he asked Capt. Gunnison, his curiosity appearing in eyes and voice.

“If you please,” was the reply.

Mrs. Amberleigh would have kept beside the man of whom, by reason of their long seclusion, she seemed a necessary part; but, with an ineffable gentleness in touch and voice, he put his hand on her shoulder and said:

“Madolire, do not feel hurt if I ask you to remain behind with the others while I talk with this gentleman. You know that I would not make the request without weighty reason. We will rejoin you in a few minutes.”

Through his voice vibrated a tender deprecation which, to the Gentleman from Pike, seemed more than the occasion called for. Later he understood it fully.

With a look of questioning surprise, yet perfect trust, Mrs. Amberleigh yielded compliance; but her wistful eyes never left the gentlemen as they walked in advance, in low, earnest conversation. What was the revelation being made?

CHAPTER XXXV.

A WICKED WOMAN'S DOOM.

MRS. SEAFORD was pacing her room in a state of high excitement, when a small pebble fell upon the floor, coming through the open window.

Divining that it was a signal, she hastened to the window and peered out into the darkness.

Below stood a man in a rough miner's dress. He made a quick motion with his hand, and then moved away down the street.

It was midnight; but, without a moment's

hesitation, the woman dressed herself in black, so as to be inconspicuous in the darkness, crept unobserved from the hotel, and hastened in the direction taken by her mysterious summoner.

"He is going to take me to her," she reflected, with a fierce chuckle of unrelenting malignity. "Ah! it will be worth all it has cost me to see her writhel! And perhaps it will be as well for me to keep out of his way until the edge of his fury is turned. How he looked at me! For her sake he might go to any length, notwithstanding my womanhood. Ha! ha! when he comes to wring from me the secret of her whereabouts, I'll tell him fast enough. Much happiness will the recovery of her bring him! Then he will rid me of my cat's-paw. The fool!—does he think to buy a woman's love by gratifying her hate? And, having betrayed a man a hundred fold his superior, does he think that I will keep faith with him?"

With these reflections coursing through her brain, she hastened after the Frisco Sharp, who kept ahead of her until they had left the mining camp out of sight.

"Well?" she queried, upon overtaking him.

"I have come to take you to her," he replied.

"You have divined my wish. This will be the sweetest part of my revenge! How does she bear herself? Is she crushed to the earth? But why did you carry her off? She must be restored to her lover! The blow is but half struck while she suffers alone."

The Frisco Sharp shuddered at the ghoul-like eagerness of the woman. But before he could reply, they had to leave the road, to avoid the party baffled in their attempt to follow his trail.

The sun was above the mountain peaks when they entered the canyon leading to the cave where Lillian was imprisoned. Before the mouth of the cave the Frisco Sharp stopped. Until now he had delayed telling Mrs. Seaford his failure to carry out her plot, and the substitute he had to propose. Her exultation had been so utterly without remorse that he knew that she would exact the utmost of him. Now with a chill of dread upon him, he said:

"Stop a moment. I have something to tell you before you enter."

"I have no time to listen now!" cried the woman. "Let me see her at once! When my hatred has been cooled a little, then I will hear all you have to say. Now I want to see her!—I want to laugh in her face!—I want to make her welcome to such love as she can win from him now!"

And in her eagerness she would have preceded her guide into the black mouth of the cavern.

But the Frisco Sharp detained her resolutely.

"Wait!" he faltered. "She is not as you expect to find her."

She turned upon him with wondering inquiry struggling with her impatience.

"How, not as I expect to find her? What has happened?"

Then, eagerly:

"Is she dead? Has she killed herself?"

Her tigerish clutch, the savage glance of her eyes, thrilled the Frisco Sharp with a shudder, and caused his heart to sink with hopelessness.

"No," he replied, "she is not dead—"

"What then? Speak! speak!"

"Aside from abduction, she has suffered no harm from me—"

"WHAT?"

The woman fairly shrieked the word.

"I could not do it," he went on, hastily, averting his eyes from her white face. "But I have another plan, which will answer every purpose of your revenge. She will swear to disappear, and never let any one know what has become of her. They will be separated; his pain will be as great; and she will suffer scarcely less. Your revenge will be complete; and I shall be spared—"

"FOOL!"

While listening to his words, the forces of her rage had been gathering themselves. Had he looked at her, he would have been warned by the intensified glitter of her eyes, the grayish whiteness of her face, the gathering together of her frame. But, with his eyes on the ground, he knew nothing of her murderous purpose until her hand struck his breast violently and a deadly faintness came. Then he realized that she had fished a stiletto to the hilt in his body!

One look of agonized reproach, and he sunk to the ground, without a word!

Like an insane creature the woman rushed into the yawning mouth of the cavern, carrying the reeking knife in her hand.

"At least, I can kill her!—I can kill her!—I can kill her!" was the one thought that kept surging through her brain.

Through the interstices in the rocky barricade she could see the gleam of the torchlight within.

Then, with her frail hands infused with the strength of a maniac, she began to tear away the rocks, until she had effected an entrance.

Lillian Amberleigh stood with distended eyes and hands clasped over her panting bosom. She was struck speechless with fear, at the sight of that bloody dagger.

In the lurid torchlight, Mrs. Seaford stopped within a few feet of her victim, and stood regarding her with a hatred which transcended description.

"So!" she hissed, at last, "you bewitch every one who is sent against you? Well, try your powers on me!"

The spell was broken. It was only woman against woman, after all. Lillie was quite as large, and perhaps stronger than her antagonist. Her active life had made her self-reliant, in spite of her gentleness of disposition. Only the thought of that bloody knife cleaving its way through her flesh paralyzed her with an icy dread.

"What do you mean?" she cried, casting about for some means of escape or resistance. "Why do you persecute me so relentlessly?"

"I mean to reunite you with your two lovers!" sneered Mrs. Seaford, venomously. "One I procured the death of last night. He lies mangled out of all recognition in the canyon bottom. The other agreed to leave you a life to rid yourself of which you would willingly pass through a hundred deaths! His heart failed him, as you know. I drew off with this dagger the water that took the place of blood in his veins. He lies now just at the mouth of this cave. Ha!"

For Lillie had suddenly sprung to grasp one of the unburnt torches that lay on the floor.

But Mrs. Seaford, quite as active, leaped forward, kicked the torch beyond her reach, and menaced her with the dagger, crying:—

"Beware! Do not precipitate your own death!"

From that reeking weapon the girl shrunk away, shuddering.

But now a new thought came to Mrs. Seaford.

"Stop!" she cried, "why should I dispatch you at once? No! I have a better plan! I will leave you here to die of starvation and thirst, while you reflect on the death of the man doomed by your infamous love! I will leave you here in darkness, and drag the dead body of your last conquest into the passage, to keep you company! Ha! ha! A rare courtship you will have with that bloody corpse! You here, alone, in utter darkness; and just on the other side of your prison door the body of a murdered man! Ha! ha! I envy you your thoughts during the next few days, before death or insanity releases you from the horrors of your living tomb!"

In pursuance of her new scheme of cruelty, she began to edge her way to the torch which had in a measure dissipated the terrors of Lillian's imprisonment. But left in utter, rayless darkness, and with that hideous corpse lying between her and the daylight! Lillie was frozen with horror!

She would not submit to this without a struggle. She was growing desperate. She began to creep after her would-be murderer, watching for a chance to spring upon her and disarm her of that bloody weapon.

But Mrs. Seaford was just as vigilant. She possessed herself of the torch, and began to walk backward toward the exit of the cave.

So, each with her eyes fastened upon the other's they crossed the chamber, keeping pace, step by step, one with a laugh of malicious triumph, the other growing paler and paler, and wilder and wilder, with a desperation that increased in recklessness with every step nearer that horrible entombment with the terrors of solitude and darkness and the ghastly dead!

There was something thrilling in the spectacle of these two delicate women so entirely under the dominion of fierce animal instincts, equal in intensity though different in character.

So they had reached the mouth of the passage, when Lillian Amberleigh's eyes suddenly left those of her enemy, and passed on beyond, fixing upon some object behind Mrs. Seaford with a look of horror which surpassed even that which had preceded it, when she stood face to face with the prospect of being entombed alive.

Then the great heart of the woman manifested itself in an involuntary act—an act sublime in its generosity. She extended her hand with a cry of warning to the woman who was even then threatening her with a fate worse than death!

Before Mrs. Seaford had time for thought, she felt on her cheek the contact of something cold and clammy, which thrilled her to the soul with a sickening loathing.

Instantly after that warning cry, Lillie turned and in her blind flight, ran headlong against the canyon wall, to sink to the ground bleeding and senseless.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Seaford had turned to face the appalling danger before which the terrified girl had forgotten all else.

As she turned, she felt the coil of a serpent about her neck! Her ears were pierced with a blood-curdling hissing; her eyes were blasted with a vision that struck horror unspeakable to her soul!

With a shriek of agonized fear and repulsion, the desperate woman dashed the blazing torch full into the face of the monster, and struck wildly—again, and again, and again!—with her dagger, until it seemed as if a legion of loathsome reptiles encompassed her in their sinuous folds!

Then the torch, falling to the ground, was extinguished, and the darkened cavern resounded with the terrible cries of the Ghost of the Canyon!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE UNKNOWN PERIL.

"LET me begin," said Captain Gunnison, "by telling you briefly the sad story of Mrs. Amberleigh's life."

"She is of an excellent New England family; and up to the age of seventeen was reared in luxury. At that age the bankruptcy and resultant death of her father threw her on her own resources; and she sought to support herself as a governess."

"Imagine the life of a sensitive girl, entering in a subordinate position where she had once ruled! She was subjected to insult by her one-time rivals, until her position seemed no longer endurable."

"Then she consented to a secret marriage with a man to whom she had been betrothed during her prosperity, whose father, when adversity fell upon her, commanded his son to break the engagement on pain of disinheritance."

"For six years this boy and girl marriage—for the husband was but nineteen—had but one cloud—its secrecy and the unavoidable absence of the husband who lived this double life."

"Then, by some means, his secret was discovered, and the father cast his son off without a cent."

"Without resources, and never having earned a dollar in his life, the young husband found himself in hopeless poverty, and sunk into brooding melancholy, until his wife feared for his reason. One day he disappeared, and then her cup of wretchedness was full to overflowing."

"She appealed to his father for assistance to look for her husband. The hard-hearted parent ejected her from his door as an abandoned woman, denying that she had any legal claim on his son, and showing her a letter, in which the writer stated that he had deceived the woman, who supposed herself his wife, by a sham marriage."

"On her return home, she found another letter awaiting her, full of wild upbraiding, charging her with betraying the secret of their union and causing the writer's ruin. This letter also declared the marriage a fraud, the writer explaining that he had resorted to this means of saving his inheritance in case of detection, but always intended to marry his wife legally, as soon as he was master of his fortune."

"Can you imagine a more crushing blow! The wife did not put the world's false estimate on the situation, and feel that her own womanhood had been impaired in any degree. No stigma could attach to her, in her own esteem, by reason of another's sin. But her idol was shattered—the man she had placed on so high a pedestal had fallen below the basest."

"For weeks she lay at the point of death. Then her child called her, and she rallied. She had but one thought—to find the father of her child, and demand justice for it. Alas! in her innocence and inexperience, she had no proof of its legitimacy. She did not know the minister who had performed the ceremony, nor either of the witnesses."

"That is her story up to the time when she joined my ill-starred wagon-train. Now for our life subsequent to the catastrophe, the Ghost of the Canyon, and discoveries I have made during our long imprisonment."

It must have been a strange revelation that Capt. Gunnison had to make to the Gentleman from Pike, judging from the sad solemnity of the speaker, and the wonder and deep interest on the face of the listener.

At last the former continued:—

"I have the marriage certificate and the confession now in my possession. But how can I tell her the terrible truth? The shock would fill her whole after life with horror. I have thought that it would be better to let the papers be produced after our escape by some one else, who would claim to have received them from a dying man. In this way all that is desirable will be secured, and she will be happier by reason of her ignorance. What do you think?"

The Gentleman from Pike grasped the other's hand, and replied:—

"I cannot express the depth of my sympathy for you—and for her. The situation is as sad as it is strange. I am at a loss how to advise you. But I agree with you in this—that the terrible truth must be kept from her at all hazards. The kindness of the suppression, and the uselessness of disclosure, will be ample justification. For the rest, we must be guided by circumstances. But if the secret become public, it must almost inevitably reach her ears at some time, through gossip, or even a chance paragraph in the papers. That will be a constant menace. How can we guard against it?"

"The world must never know," said Capt. Gunnison. "You and I must make away with the mystery. In a short time its very existence will become mythical. The world will class it with the other superstitions bred by ignorance."

"Make away with it?" repeated the Gentleman from Pike, with a look of surprised inquiry.

"Understand me," replied Captain Gunnison,

"the guardians we provide for it will have no way of distinguishing it from any ordinary case, if we do not tell them the difference."

"Oh! certainly," replied the Gentleman from Pike, with a look of comprehension. "It will be a difficult and delicate task for two men so far away from a suitable place of confinement. But it *must* be done! We *shall* succeed!"

Into his face and voice came the iron determination of his nature, and Captain Gunnison knew that he had found a valuable coadjutor.

After that there was a new tenderness in the deference of the Gentleman from Pike toward Mrs. Amberleigh; but to her, as to the rest, the secrets of that conference were sealed.

But a few minutes later the speculation of the miners was lost in a new excitement.

It was a man lying on his face on the rocks, unconscious, with a bloody trail showing where he had crept on hands and knees!

The Gentleman from Pike was about to turn his face to view, when he shrunk back with a shudder of instinctive repulsion.

Captain Gunnison turned the man over.

From more than one lip sprung the exclamation:

"The Frisco Sharp!"

The Gentleman from Pike was suddenly shaken by a terrible fear.

"This may have a sinister significance," he said, breathlessly, to Captain Gunnison—"and, possibly, a hopeful one for us! No man is missing from the camp but Mose Finley; and he lies dead, we know. May not—she have been in collusion with this man—in the plot of abduction? Revive him—if he is not dead—you! I cannot bring myself to touch him! Make haste! He may confess—"

The Gentleman from Pike spoke disjointedly, his sentences broken by shuddering, as he struggled with emotions that rent his soul.

Raw brandy, poured down the throat of the unconscious man, did its work.

He opened his eyes and gazed about.

Capt. Gunnison bent over him and demanded, sternly:

"Where is Lillian Amberleigh? What have you done with her?"

The mother was on her knees, with clasped hands, and wide tearless eyes. Breathlessly she hung upon the expected answer.

The Gentleman from Pike, unable to look upon this man who had wronged him so deeply, had turned his back and so stood, quivering from head to foot.

The Frisco Sharp glanced at his interrogator, unmoved by his strange appearance; then, looking away, let his eyes rest on the passion-shaken form of the Gentleman from Pike, while he answered:

"There!—in yonder cave! My blood will lead you!"

The moment he comprehended those words, the Gentleman from Pike set out on that sanguinary trail with great bounds. His darling was at the other end! That was enough for him to know!

"Fetch this man along, two of you!" commanded Capt. Gunnison; and then followed the Gentleman from Pike, with scarcely less ardor than his.

But the mother! Ah! she would have sped with the wings of a bird! No one that saw it ever forgot the look on her face, as she ran forward! The murmuring cry that issued from her lips came back to them, years after, in dreams.

But at the mouth of the cave all stopped in sudden dismay. From the bowels of the earth came those terrible, well-known cries.

"The Ghost of the Canyon!" uttered the miners, in quivering tones, and with white-lipped fear they stopped short.

But with a cry of agony and despair, the Gentleman from Pike sprung forward into the black mouth of the cavern, groping his way with his hands. No terror could dismay him! He was going to the rescue of her he loved!

Mrs. Amberleigh, with a mother's blind devotion and recklessness of danger to self when called upon to succor her offspring, would have dashed after him, but Captain Gunnison seized and detained her.

"Not in there! not in there!" he cried, with a horror that was not born of fear of the Ghost of the Canyon, as his subsequent acts proved.

"What! what! Keep me from my child? And she threatened by that awful peril! Let me go! Let me go, I say!" cried the woman, struggling frantically to release herself.

"Madoline! Madoline!" cried Captain Gunnison, with a despair in his face that constrained the attention of the excited woman, "I implore you, by all our past association, to yield an instant, an unquestioning obedience to me in this! Would I ask of you if there were not an ample reason?"

"Do you think I fear the danger?" cried the mother with a wild, scornful laugh. "Let me go! My child!—my lost darling is calling to me!"

"It is not the danger, Madoline!"

"What reason, then, that can keep a mother from her child? Oh! relax your cruel grasp!"

"I cannot tell you! But, listen! If you persist, I swear that I will not enter there! Is my

arm or yours the stronger? See! while you are detaining me, what may not happen which I might prevent?"

That consideration conquered her.

"Go! go! I will remain!" she cried, pushing him forward, in her eagerness. "See! I will not move a step nearer! Go! only go!"

And she sunk on her knees, raising her clasped hands and streaming eyes to heaven, and calling aloud upon God to protect her heart's darling!

Thus freed from her importunity, Captain Gunnison turned to the men.

"Light torches!" he commanded; "but do not enter here! I will kill with my own hand the man who dares to disobey me in this!"

Then the black mouth of the cave seemed to swallow him up.

Small need was there of his last command. Paralyzed with superstitious dread, the men drew near together while they listened to the strange sounds that issued from the hollow earth.

Would either of those bold adventurers who had braved the terrors of the Ghost of the Canyon ever come forth again alive?

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE MYSTERY!

FOR minutes that seemed ages the watchers at the mouth of the cave waited and listened to the muffled sounds made scarcely intelligible by the hollow echoes.

The terrible cries of the Ghost of the Canyon had died away into low moanings before the Gentleman from Pike disappeared from view. These continued a little while after Captain Gunnison entered.

Then there were sounds of another voice seemingly raised in lamentation. A moment later Captain Gunnison appeared at the mouth of the cave, demanding a torch.

There was a look of awful horror on his face which he could not disguise.

The mother seized his arm.

"My child! My child!" she panted.

"Hush! Remain where you are!" he enjoined, putting her away with infinite tenderness, and turning at once to re-enter the cave.

The mother uttered a wild cry.

"O-o-h! She is dead! She is dead! See! there is blood on your hands!"

And with a shriek, she fell senseless.

Captain Gunnison shuddered with horror. There was blood on his hands.

"Take care of her, some one!" he pleaded.

"I cannot touch her! I would stain her with her child's blood! My God! after all these years, to find her thus!"

"Boss, is the Angel dead?" asked Moxy, with awe and regret in his face and voice.

"Oh! I don't know! I don't know! Do not detain me! See to her, some of you!" cried Capt. Gunnison, distractedly.

"Don't worry, yer honor," said Tom O'Connor. "Sure it's the best attention we'll be givin' her, poor thing!"

And without waiting longer, Capt. Gunnison tore his agonized gaze from the woman whose pain pierced his heart, and dashed into the cave.

As he gained the inner chamber and held the torch above his head, the lurid flames in a measure dispelled the gloom, disclosing the Gentleman from Pike bending over the senseless, perhaps lifeless, body of a woman.

The agony in his face was terrible to look upon. His iron soul was wrung as no weaker one could be.

But as the light fell upon the face of the woman, he started back with a sharp cry.

"Why—Great Heaven!"

The man gasped; then struck his hands together.

"Thank God!—thank God!"

But at that he stopped, shuddering. In a changed voice, he went on:

"My God! What am I saying?"

Capt. Gunnison gazed at the woman. She was terribly lacerated, and apparently dead. But she bore no resemblance to Mrs. Amberleigh. Her hair was black. Lillian's, he knew, was blonde.

"Who is this?" he asked. "Not her daughter, surely?"

"No—no," said the Gentleman from Pike. "It is a Mrs. Seaford."

"The woman whom you suspect of having procured her abduction?"

"Yes."

"She has been overtaken by a terrible fate!" said Capt. Gunnison, solemnly.

He turned and looked into the shadows at a little distance. There, faintly discernible in the uncertain light, lay an object at which even now he shuddered.

It lay motionless; but about it still coiled those hissing serpents.

Upon closer examination Capt. Gunnison became greatly agitated.

"It is dead!" he said, at last. "Her dagger did the work. It must have been a terrible struggle!"

Then he stood motionless, with his eyes fixed on vacancy and his features working spasmodically.

He was called from his abstraction by the voice of the Gentleman from Pike.

"But where is the poor child whom we expected to find here? We must look further for her. But where? Ah! I have it! We will force him to confess!"

He avoided the name of Jules St. Auburn.

Capt. Gunnison seemed suddenly possessed of a feverish restlessness.

"Let us search the cave first," he said, rapidly. "She may be here."

Even as he spoke, walking forward, the Gentleman from Pike uttered a cry and sprung across the cavern.

In an instant he had Lillian Amberleigh in his arms. A hurried examination showed that she was only in a swoon.

"Mine! mine, at last! No earthly power can separate us now! Thank God! thank God!"

And the man who loved with a strong man's love covered that unconscious face with tears and kisses.

Capt. Gunnison shared to the full in this transport of delight. Ah! what a glorious surprise he would have for the long-tried mother when she awoke from her swoon!

"Come on!" cried the Gentleman from Pike, rising with the woman of his love clasped close over his heart; and he would instantly have borne her from the cave.

But Capt. Gunnison detained him.

"Stop! Her mother lies in a swoon, thinking her dead! Let us revive her here, so that she can appear alive and well."

In a moment they had brought her to. Her first act, on opening her eyes, filled the soul of the Gentleman from Pike with a strain of thanksgiving that from that moment never ceased its blessed vibration! She clasped him about the neck with a cry that told him all that he hungered to know!

After a moment's selfish revel in her love, he told her who his strangely-attired companion was; and then gently broke to her the news of her mother's restoration to them.

At that she was transported with a frenzy of delight. She ran forward, clinging to his hand, however. So they emerged from the cave.

What a shout went up!

It must have startled Mrs. Amberleigh's sluggish sensibilities into renewed activity. Her first consciousness was of clinging arms, rapturous kisses, and a voice that sounded like an angel's, crying:

"Mamma! mamma! mamma! My own darling!—darling!—darling!—darling! mamma!"

Then her arms closed about her long-lost treasure!

Enough! The pen falters!

Mrs. Amberleigh and her daughter were hurried away under the escort of Captain Gunnison.

Then the Gentleman from Pike entered the cavern and bore forth the dead body of Mrs. Seaford. A stretcher was made, and the body placed upon it.

Tom O'Connor was then asked to stand guard over the mouth of the cave, and allow no one to enter. He turned a little pale at the thought of guarding that unknown thing alone, but was at last reassured by the Gentleman from Pike, who took him apart and talked to him in a low tone.

When the rest of the party were ready to set out for the mining-camp, Moxy said, referring to the Frisco Sharp:

"Look a-hyar, boss, what shall we do with this cuss? Can't we hang him here, to yonder pine, as well as cartin' him into camp?"

Then in icy tones the Gentleman from Pike said:

"Let him go!"

The miners stood agog.

"I am the aggrieved party," said the Gentleman from Pike, sternly. "Again, I say, let him go! This horse is at his disposal."

Moxy's hand fell away from the prisoner.

The Frisco Sharp stood a moment, irresolute, looking at the man whose magnanimity had repeatedly given him his life, whose eyes had never looked at him when avoidable.

"I have wronged you much—"

So far he got. But the Gentleman from Pike cut him short, with a furious stamp of the foot, and a muffled cry of such savage hatred that every man within round of his voice, save only the Frisco Sharp himself, quailed with dread.

Without a word further, Jules St. Auburn turned, mounted the horse with difficulty, and rode slowly away.

Everybody looked after him but the Gentleman from Pike, who was already walking in the direction of the camp.

Mrs. Seaford was decently buried.

In the darkness of night a man came and lay for several hours, watering the new-made mound with his tears. It was the Frisco Sharp.

That night Tom O'Connor was relieved from his guard by two shadowy forms. The three entered the cave; bore forth a *Something* to secret burial in the mountain fastnesses; then flitted like phantoms back to camp.

To the world the veil of mystery was never lifted from the Ghost of the Canyon.

Tom O'Connor was speaking. His auditors were Mrs. Amberleigh and the daughter whom it seemed as if she would never let for a moment out of her arms, Capt. Gunnison, and the Gentleman from Pike.

"Yez see, ma'am," he was saying, "Musther Maikham was a pardner of mine. I knowed he was wrong in the upper shitory. Sometimes he had the batin' o' the divil in 'um—jeggin' yer pardon, ma'am. But only that he was what yed' call a moneymaniac—"

"Monomaniac," suggested the Gentleman from Pike.

"That's it, sir. Thank yez. It's the twist o' the tongue I'm lackin'. Only fur that, as I was sayin', he was all right."

"Well, whin he come to his last legs, his mind cleared, an' he gives me these papers."

"A marriage certificate an' an acknowledgment d'yez mind, Tom," says he. "It'll undo a wrong that in me *delusion*—whativer that is, I dunno—it'll undo a wrong that in me *delusion*," says he, "I have done me darlin' woife. Hunt her up, Tom, an' take a thousand dollars over and above all yer expinses out o' me pile, givin' the rest to her an' the child," says he. An' yez u'd have but to see him to know that he was that grieved he was ready to break his heart."

"Well, I promised; and thin we laid him away. An' would yez belave it?—that week the Injuns cleaned out our camp; fur that was a thrick they did more than wanst in thim days. I got off wid me life but niver a cint o' gold. An' from that day to this I've niver had enough together to go to the States an' hunt up yer ladyship: ur, b'lave me, I'd 'a' done it!"

"Av Misthress Lillian, here, had had her father's handle, wouldn't I have given her the papers long ago? But how would I know that Misthress Amberleigh was Musther Maikham's daughter?"

Such was the story which told Mrs. Amberleigh and her daughter that the husband and father had injured them when mental aberration made him irresponsible. This, the only essential point, was strictly true. They mourned him with a sense of gratitude that now no reproach clouded his memory.

Was it not wisest so?

Surrounded by the grand old peaks of the Sierras, domed by the star-gemmed heavens, Capt. Gunnison stood in the peaceful night, with his arms about the woman he had loved so long, her head pillowed on his shoulder, her lips pressed warm to his!

"One question, dear Will, before we bury the subject forever. Why have you never punished him for the wrongs he has inflicted on you?"

The voice of the Gentleman from Pike was deep and constrained, as he replied:—

"He was my half-brother! Whenever I raised my hand against him, he looked at me with my mother's eyes! I could not look into them and strike!"

"But the past is dead! Let us look into the glowing future!"

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